Early Pittsburgh Planemakers: a Professor, a Soldier, a Runaway & Craftsmen All

by Charles W. Prine, Jr.

HISTORIES OF THE Pittsburgh region written in the 19th and early 20th centuries tend to concentrate on events and biographies of political and business leaders. Largely ignored are the lives of common citizens, many of whom were tradesmen. In fact, a quick reading of the columns of names and occupations in the directories published in the first half of the 1800s suggests that the typical trades in the Pittsburgh area were carpenters, blacksmiths, cooperers, wheelwrights, tanners, tinsmiths, cabinetmakers, millwrights, stone-masons, cobblers, and harnessmakers.

While some may argue that history is the lives of great men, another perspective is that the “story of man” can be best understood through the development of his tools. Primitive man used his hands. Somewhere along the way what he could do with his hands was extended through the use of stones as tools. Sharp rocks became knives, and when vine ropes were used to attach wooden handles to rocks, they became axes.

Chuck Prine began collecting antique tools more than 20 years ago. In recent years, he has concentrated on antique wooden planes made in Western Pennsylvania, and has committed a fabulous collection of some 200 to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. The planes, among the oldest documented items made in the Pittsburgh region, will be used in exhibits at The Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center, which opens in 1996. Now retired and living in Mt. Lebanon, Pa., Mr. Prine was a journalist with the former Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph, a public relations executive, and a vice president of Ryan Homes, Inc. Active in civic affairs, he was for five years president of Action-Housing Inc., and is currently a board member of the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency.
Improvements in tools developed over centuries. The carpenters who first came to America brought implements whose use would easily have been understood by carpenters from the time of Christ.

This perspective insists that the most notable changes in human life have come from the invention of steam and electric power tools and their facility in mass-producing transportation, entertainment, and data processing instruments that could not have been imagined 200 years ago.

In recent years, perhaps resulting from a yearning for what is wistfully perceived as the simpler life of our great-great grandparents, there has been a growing interest in the day-to-day lives of that generation. More people are collecting old tools, joining craft organizations and trying to reproduce the products made with antique tools. Very few of these old tools give any hint as to their maker. The major exception are planes used by carpenters, cabinet makers, ship builders and other tradesmen to smooth and shape wood. Pick up an old plane at a flea market or antique mall, look at the end or toe of the plane and you may be lucky to find the name and location of the maker.

If you do find such a tool, you might be curious about that maker who stands out from the mostly anonymous tradesmen by identifying himself with his product. Not much is known about some of the makers — perhaps a single listing in a directory or a name in a census which might have been the same person. A few of the early Pittsburgh planemakers led lives that set them apart from the ordinary.

Those early Pittsburghers are the first known makers of planes to ply their craft west of the Allegheny Mountains. Later planemakers have been identified in such cities as Cincinnati, Dayton, Louisville, St. Louis, and smaller towns in Indiana and Iowa. In the late 1790s and early 1800s, Pittsburgh was a rapidly developing gateway for the westward expansion. The pioneers who came over the mountains stocked up in Pittsburgh for their search for new homelands to the west. As the ice broke up in spring, new settlers boarded flatboats with their supplies for the next leg of their westward journey. The first steamboat on the western waters, the New Orleans, made its maiden voyage in 1811 from Pittsburgh, where it was built, to the city for which it was named.

Pittsburgh’s great glass industry had its beginnings in a plant built in 1797 on top of a coal mine overlooking the Monongahela River. A foundry to make farm tools and machinery for new industries began operations in 1804 at about the same time that a factory for carding and spinning cotton opened. Paper mills had already been built and rolling mills were shortly established in outlying areas. Even as Pittsburgh was taking its first steps toward becoming an industrial colossus, most of the townspeople were tradesmen working with hand tools. These tools were also handmade by tradesmen who specialized in crafts of their own. Blacksmiths made the iron tools and the blades or irons for the planes. The planemakers devised the tools used for the intricate shaping of wood by carpenters and cabinetmakers as well as a variety of other trades. A carpenter or cabinetmaker might have had 200 planes in his shop. Some types of molding planes came in sets of as many as 18, each cutting a different size.

The earliest shaping of wood was done with stone tools followed by the development of bronze and copper tools which took the form of axes, chisels and adzes. It is believed that planes were developed during the fourth or fifth century B.C., probably in Greece. These planes had the general shape of the woodworkers’ planes of today. They consisted of a wooden body encased in iron; a hole in the middle extended to a slit in the bottom; inserted there was a piece of iron with a sharp edge held in place by a wedge. Although there are planes in museums dating to the first century A.D., recovered from the ruins of Pompeii and various Roman sites, there aren’t many examples from the beginning of the Dark Ages through 1500 A.D. The common theory is that the buildings and furniture were so plain that simpler tools could be used. It wasn’t until the Renaissance, when more elaborate structures and furnishings became popular, that planemaking had its own revival. More diversified curves and moldings were required, and separate planes were shaped out of wood with blades to match the contours of the cuts desired.

Planemaking in America had its beginnings in Massachusetts, with the first known maker dated to 1730. Prior to that, planes were imported primarily from England, and the first American planes generally followed English styling. One of the major resources pioneers had was wood, and the plane became the tool of choice for wood’s final shaping. The simplest planes were bench and smoothing planes, which were used to transform the rough edges left from saw cuts into a smooth surface. Some of these planes used by house carpenters to level floors were as long as 40 inches, with cutting blades up to 3 inches in width.

Perhaps the most interesting early planes were the group called molding planes, used by carpenters and cabinetmakers to decorate wood around windows, door frames or the sides of cupboards and chests. They came in unusual but generally standard profiles. The cutting irons on the cornice planes (also called crown molding planes) were as wide as 6 inches. The larger planes were so heavy that two people were required to operate them: a rope was slipped through a hole in the body, so that an apprentice pulled on the plane while the carpenter pushed. The most creative designs were embodied in the plow planes, used to cut grooves in boards. An example would be the groove in the side of a cabinet drawer into which the bottom was fitted. These planes included an adjustable attachment known as a fence with elaborate wooden screw-arms that were attached to the body of the plane. This enabled the user to set the groove the distance he needed from the edge of the board. Knobs that held the screw arms were often decorated far in excess of any utilitarian purpose.

A plow plane made of boxwood, rosewood or ebony with ivory tips on the ends of the arms and brass hardware is truly a work of art. Even the simple molding planes had gracefully chamfered rather than sharp edges, and many planemakers had their own slightly different designs for the finials on the wedges that held the cutting blades or irons in place. It is no wonder that the makers were proud enough of their work to imprint their names on the front of the plane by using a metal stamp with raised
or recessed letters that cut into the surface. (New collectors of
these planes should be forewarned that owners also often stamped
their names on planes frequently in more than one place. The
makers themselves almost universally marked only the front of the
planes and usually added a location. A single name stamp without
a location or other evidence identifying the maker is assumed to
be an owner name until proven otherwise.)

Charles Morse Stotz, in his wonderful book, *The Architectural
Heritage of Early Western Pennsylvania,* points out that in 1796
Pittsburgh had only 150 houses, most made of logs. From 1785
until 1830, he writes, "there appeared in various parts of the
district reflections not only of every phase of late Georgian and
Classic Revival styles from the eastern states, but also many
examples of direct importation from Europe." He comments that
"this architecture...makes Western Pennsylvania a veritable
museum of architectural styles."

Stotz reports that handbooks by American architects and
carpenter-builders were beginning to be published in the early
19th century. Zadock Cramer, a Pittsburgh almanac editor and
book dealer, was advertising such books for sale in 1810. These
books not only provide architectural drawings, but also profile the
various moldings available for doors, windows, railings, mantle
pieces and the cornices at the top of walls. To build and furnish
elaborate new houses of the day, a carpenter needed the special
molding planes made by the early planemakers. Stotz observes
that "the craftsman treated his simple materials with loving care,
delightful in the clean white wood shavings that curled from his
hand plane." The planemaking craft in Western Pennsylvania was
short-lived and Stotz indicates that by the middle of the 19th
century, "the carpenter laid aside his molding planes when
machine-run moldings were to be had more cheaply." Even
though most of the early planes were discarded, a few survive
today; they are among the earliest examples of a crafted product
made in Pittsburgh whose maker can be identified.

The first specific mention of planemaking in Pittsburgh is
contained in Cramer's *Pittsburgh Almanac,* listing "carpenter
planes" among the manufactured items of 1803. A later *Almanac*
states there were four planemakers in 1807. By 1813, Cramer
writes: "Carpenter plains (sic) are made of excellent quality and in
such quantities as to supply the demand of the country. Mr. Wm.
Scott and Mr. Lithgow are the principal manufacturers of this
article." "The country" probably meant the vast area extending
beyond a line some 30 miles west of Pittsburgh and known as "the
Ohio Country." It is no wonder that early Pittsburgh-made planes
still turn up in antique sales and flea markets in Ohio, Indiana and
Illinois almost as often as in Western Pennsylvania.

Cramer's *Almanac* leaves it a mystery as to who was the first
person to make a business of planemaking in Pittsburgh and when
he set up shop. The first date of reference is 1803, but it is likely
that the first maker was in business before that. By 1807, Cramer
indicates there were four makers, but he doesn't name them.
Walter Lithgow and William Scott probably were two of them.
The other two probably worked for Lithgow or Scott. The
rationale for that conclusion is that there are no other unidentified
Plow planes cut grooves in a board so that another board could be inserted, such as in attaching the bottom of a drawer to its side. Such planes, which in their more expensive versions included distinctive, decorative knobs and arms, usually were sold with a set of eight irons ranging in width from 1/8- to 5/8-inch. This plane was made by William Evens.

names on any quantity of planes with early characteristics which have shown up in the Pittsburgh area.

Although the names of the early politicians and entrepreneurial merchants and bankers are found in the history books, it is apparent that many tradesmen, now little known, held respected positions in the community. They owned their own homes and shops and often employed other tradesmen and apprentices. They were major contributors to the commerce of the city, buying raw materials from others and turning out finished products which were sold locally or exported westward. The basic purpose of the first city directories published in 1813 and 1815, when the Pittsburgh population numbered less than 10,000, was to list these tradesmen by name and occupation.

The quest for information about early craftsmen has become an offshoot of antique collecting. Just as art collectors are interested in the lives of painters, antique craft collectors are becoming
interested in "bringing to life" the names that may be imprinted on their acquisitions. To decide an object's value, some people believe the marketplace has clearly established that the history of the maker may be more important than the history of the object. For others, the history of the maker is most interesting for the insights it provides about all craftsmen of the day.

What follows are brief sketches of the lives of four early Pittsburgh planemakers. A striking aspect of these individual histories is that, in addition to being skilled craftsmen serving specialized trades, planemakers often enjoyed prominent reputations in the larger affairs of their community.

WALTER LITHGOW

One of the two earliest known Pittsburgh planemakers, Lithgow was regularly the subject of news articles in the Pittsburgh papers during 1812 and 1813 — not because he was a planemaker, but because of his military activities.

The 1810 federal census lists Lithgow in Pittsburgh, but there is no known information about how long he had been in the area or where he had lived previously. His marriage to Frances Stevenson was noted in Cramer's 1810 Almanac.

The Pennsylvania Archives show several references to his service in the 141st Regiment of the Pennsylvania Militia during the time of the War of 1812. He was a captain in the Light Infantry, 15th Division. Men who served in the militia were not full-time soldiers, but rather patriotic citizens who made themselves available for military duty on the call of the governor — something on the order of today's National Guard or U.S. military reserve units. At times, militia involvement required men to give up their regular lives and march off into the wilderness.

According to the September 17, 1812, Mercury, an early Pittsburgh newspaper, Lithgow was among five captains from Allegheny County scheduled to rendezvous eight days later with militia volunteers to march to Buffalo. Newspaper reports suggest, however, that Lithgow and most of the other soldiers saw little combat, due to controversial tactics employed by Gen. Alexander Smyth, and a January 14, 1813, notice in the Mercury indicates that Lithgow had returned home.

Most of the rest of what is known about Lithgow is contained in records pertaining to his death on September 5, 1813. The Commonwealth, another early Pittsburgh paper, reported that he died "after an illness of a few days." The death notice read: "His remains were attended to the grave on Monday by his weeping relatives and an immense concourse of sympathizing friends. He has left an amiable widow and one child to mourn the loss of fond husband and an affectionate father." Lithgow's wife, Frances, lived 23 years more and the notice of her death in the Mercury identified her simply as the "widow of the late Capt. Walter Lithgow."

The most interesting document relating to Walter Lithgow is the inventory and appraisal of his estate filed shortly after his death. This is one of the earliest such inventories on record in the Allegheny County Recorder of Deeds Office:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Description</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>70 Reverse Planes for making tools</td>
<td>$42.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Molding planes with irons</td>
<td>14.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

124 unfinished Molding planes .................................. 35.00
13 unfinished planes plow & groves ............................. 4.00
3 fore planes 1 jointer ........................................... 6.00
1 double iron smoothing plane ..................................... 1.37
1 double iron for fore plane ....................................... 0.62
1 Fore plane 1 Jack with irons .................................. 2.75
58 Jack planes and toasts unfinished .......................... 30.00
42 Smoothing planes unfinished .................................. 14.00
5 pair sash planes unfinished ..................................... 5.00
1 Moving plow 3 (unreadable) ................................. 4.00

Also listed were many tools used in his trade, including 22 floats (special planemakers' tools somewhat on the order of files used to smooth the confined area known as the throat of the plane in which the blade was inserted). Lithgow also owned two downtown lots on what is now Fifth Avenue. His wife, Frances, and George Stevenson, Jr., her brother, were administrators of the estate and sold the property at public auction on January 13, 1814.

Lithgow's planes are imprinted "WLITHGOW" on one line with "PITTSB." underneath. They are among the rarest of the identified late 18th/early 19th century planemakers from any part of the United States. Probably less than a dozen are in collections today.

WILLIAM SCOTT

William Scott, the other of the two earliest known Pittsburgh planemakers, was identified for more than 27 years in city directories and census records as a planemaker.

A list of Pittsburgh voters from 1805 includes a William Scott, but there are no clues as to whether he was the planemaking William Scott except that Zadok Cramer's 1803 Almanac listed carpenter planes among the manufactured items. As pointed out earlier, a later edition of the Almanac stated that four planemakers lived in Pittsburgh in 1807.

The first specific reference to Scott as a planemaker is found in a deed referring to a property purchase at "Fourth St. toward Wood" on April 13, 1812, by William Scott, planemaker, from William Wilkins in Col. Wood's General Plan.

Pittsburgh city directories published in 1813, 1815, 1819 and 1826 all list William Scott, planemaker, downtown. By the time of the next directory, in 1837, Scott was listed as "plane maker, At," meaning "Allegheny Town," now the city's North Side. The 1839 directory has his address in Allegheny as the "east side east commons." The earliest planes with Scott's name have the imprint "W.SCOTT PITTSBG." Later planes include the name "ALLEGHENY TOWN" in an arc above the name imprint. More examples of planes made by Scott are in collectors' hands than most other Pittsburgh-area makers because he turned out planes over such a long period.

The last reference to Scott as a planemaker is the 1839 directory, but he may have made planes for a few more years. The 1840 census lists a William Scott in Allegheny, as does the 1850 census, which gives his age as 69 and occupation as "clerk of market." Living with him at that time were Sarah, 65, and William, Jr., 31, "river man." Since the census doesn't show the address
and no previous reference to his wife’s name has been found, it is difficult to claim that the planemaker and the clerk of market were the same person. The age, however, provides a logical clue in that Scott, the planemaker, if the same man, would have been in his 20s when Cramer’s directories were referring to unidentified planemakers and 31 when he bought the lot on Fourth Street.

Scott’s output included a wide variety of plane types. A screw-arm plow plane has been found which features a unique method for locking the depth stop to control the deepness of the groove being cut. The range and quality of Scott’s planes leads one to wonder whether he learned his trade from an earlier unknown Pittsburgh planemaker or picked up his craft in an eastern city.

WILLIAM EVENS

It is ironic that more is known about William Evens, a contemporary of Scott’s who was born in England and learned his planemaking trade from him after arriving in Pittsburgh, than about Scott himself. Another curiosity is that the best source of information about Evans, one of the two most prolific of the early Pittsburgh planemakers, is the Music Department of the main branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

The library has several scrapbooks which Evans maintained during his life. They are mostly filled with newspaper clippings and copies of music programs. Evens is well known to historians of Pittsburgh musical affairs. The Pittsburgh Musical Society adopted its constitution at a meeting in Evens’ home on January 30, 1818, and he is a signer of the original by-laws of that group.

Evens led a dual life for many years as a music teacher and planemaker. The early city directories of 1815 and 1819 list him as a planemaker. The 1826 directory refers to him as “planemaker and music master.” The 1837 directory calls him “planemaker and teacher of music.” The 1839 directory lists him as “professor of music.”

An advertisement in the Pittsburgh Gazette of October 10, 1817, headed “SINGING SCHOOL” announced the location and charges for Evans’ classes in “SACRED MUSIC.” It concluded:

P.S. Likewise the plane making business carried on as usual. A general assortment of fashionable MOULDING PLANES on hand, do PANNEL, PLOUGH, BENCH PLANES, and PLOUGHS and GROVES, warranted IRONS, SEASON TIMBER five years old. Irwin street, between the Allegheny river and Penn street.

Evens was born November 29, 1783, and lived in Sealescomb near Battle, Sussex, England. According to his own diary, he left England on April 8, 1804, as a ship’s carpenter and arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on July 13 of that year.

He must have been a young man who always thought the grass was greener somewhere else. In the next few years, he traveled across most of the known territory of what is now eastern Canada and the northeastern United States, working at various trades and trying to make a go of singing schools.

He states in his diary that he ran away from the ship a week after it landed and went to work in the wheelwrighting business. By 1806, he had found his way to Boston, where he worked for a man making chaise wheels. In 1809, he moved to Montreal, which was not exactly next door by coach or wagon. Apparently things did not work out there. Before the year was out he had moved some 200 miles up the St. Lawrence River to Kingston, where he opened two singing schools.

The next year found Evans in Detroit, where he set up two more singing schools, one in Detroit and the other across the river in Ontario. These ventures must not have been very successful because a year later Evans had headed back east to Philadelphia. From that city he somehow got onto a wagon which, according to his diary, took 20 days to reach its destination. In his own words on September 16, 1811, “We arrived at Pittsburgh, the Pennsylvania Smokehouse.”

The immediate prospect for a music school in this small town (in 1810 there were 767 houses and 4,740 people) must have been a little bleak. It was a town of tradesmen and shop workers — an embryonic industrial colossus. Evans’ first employment was with a maker of bedsteads and rough boxes.

In the spring of 1812, Evans notes in his diary that he “engag’d to work for Billy Scott the Planemaker on low wages for insight.” Evans, who had been a carpenter among his various trades, developed his “insight” quickly and opened his own shop in October 1813. The following advertisement appeared in the Mercury on November 25, 1813:

To Carpenters & Cabinet Makers

WM. EVENS respectfully informs his friends and the public in general that he has taken the Plane Makers Shop lately occupied by Mr. Walter Lithgow, deceased, in Market street, where he carries on the PLANE MAKING BUSINESS, in all its various branches, and hopes by his strict attention to his business to obtain a share of the public patronage.

An early deed book records that Evans’ 25-foot lot on Irwin Street (now Seventh Street) was part of one of Col. Wood’s plans. Evans completed a two-story house on Irwin Street and moved into it on April 1, 1816. He rented a back lot for his shop. Four years later, he gave up that shop and built a new one on what he called “the back part of the front lot.”

Evens apparently had difficulty recruiting and maintaining apprentices, as indicated by the following advertisement which appeared in the Mercury on July 15, 1815:

No Reward, nor any Charges!

ABSCONDED from my service, on the night of the 11th inst., a long, lazy, lapsed apprentice boy to the plane making business named JAMES SALKED, aged 19 years, five feet nine inches high, fair skin, light complexion, fond of spirits, rambling and gambling, chewing tobacco and smoking cigars to excess, and using the profanest language. I will give no reward nor pay any charges for the return of this hopeful child.

Wm. EVENS, Plane Maker

PITTSBURGH, July 15.

It should be noted that a young boy would often enter into an agreement with a tradesman whereby the boy would work for a number of years to learn the trade before going out on his own. In fact, during this period, the boy was really treated like a slave and, if caught running away, he could be severely punished or imprisoned.

The language of the above ad for a runaway was typical of the times when tradesmen took a sort of revenge against apprentices...
who broke their agreements by besmirching their characters in order to discourage other employers. The runaway must not have been returned, and Evens ran the following ad in several weekly editions of the *Pittsburgh Gazette* in the Summer and Fall of 1815.

WANTED IMMEDIATELY

To the Plane Making Business TWO APPRENTICES, from 14 to 15 years of age. Lads from the Country will be preferred. Apply to the subscriber.

WM. EVENS, Plane Maker PITTSBURGH, August 11, 1815

Evens began his music school sometime within a year or so of his moving to Irwin Street. His first school, at First and Wood streets, had 75 pupils; he moved the school to numerous locations in later years. By age 35, he was one of the leading figures in Pittsburgh music circles. Not only was his house used for meetings of the Musical Society, he led concerts and eventually advertised lessons in "French horn, trumpet, bugle, bassoon, clarionet, flute, violin, cello." He also sold sheet music and books on music. His scrapbooks indicate he kept tabs on the national music scene and contain many newspaper reviews of concerts in Boston. Dr. Edward G. Baynham states in his book, *A History of Pittsburgh Music*, that Evens had the best music library of his day.

Between 1815 and 1820, several other planemakers opened shops, and during the next decade, Evens may have found it difficult to compete while running a music business, too. In 1831,
he sold his house on Irwin Street. The deed for the transaction lists his wife’s name as Rhoda. Her name also appears with her husband’s in the 1850 census.

Of particular interest to students of early tool making will be an excerpt from the ad for the sale of his house which stated “also for sale valuable set of Mother PLANES and PATTERNS.” A mother plane was used in initial design of all the planes that followed in that particular style; it looked like the finished molding which the manufactured plane made from the mother plane would cut. Because they would not have been used by a carpenter in his work, mother planes were mostly discarded when planemakers went out of business. Today, authentic mother planes from the early planemakers are extremely rare.

Several months before he sold his house, Evans had leased a lot fronting on the Commons in Allegheny City. The time between the lot purchase and the sale of his old home would have given him time to build the two-story frame house into which he moved his family. His diary also mentions that he built a small shop at his new location.

During the next few years, he was active with his several music schools. By this time, he was going out to different locations to conduct classes. But his activities must not have been netting him a very good income. In 1832, and again in 1851, he auctioned off books from his beloved music library.

The 1837 city directory (the first one since 1826) lists Evans as “Plane manufacturer and teacher of music, At.” In the 1839 directory, he was listed only as “professor of music.” His name does not appear in the city directories of 1841, 1844, and 1847, but he is again listed as a planemaker in 1850 and 1852. It is doubtful, however, that he was making many planes in the 1840s and 1850s because of the growth of hardware wholesale companies which were buying planes from out-of-state plane factories. In fact, no occupation is shown after his name in the 1850 census. Most of Evans’ planes were probably made in the 25-year period between 1813 and 1838. Evans died of cholera at age 70 on August 1, 1854.

Although Evans obviously made a lot of planes, they are scarce today. Those that have survived are well-crafted. Most have clear imprints of Evans’ name in big bold letters. Evans’ mentor, William Scott, also lived in Allegheny, both on the “east side east commons.” Although Scott marked the planes he made on north side of the river “Allegheny Town,” the writer has never seen a plane by Evans with any other mark than “W. EVENS PIT.” An Evans trademark is the small heart in place of a period between the “W” and the “E.”

THOMAS CLARK

Leonard Kennedy, one of the leading planemakers in the Connecticut Valley, which was an early center of New England planemaking, ran an ad about a runaway apprentice in 1818. The writer has found the runaway 175 years later. The following advertisement appeared in the January 24, 1818, Hartford Courant:

RUN AWAY from the subscriber in November last, an apprentice boy, named THOMAS CLARK, about twenty years of age.

All persons are forbid harbouring or trusting him, on penalty of the law.

LEONARD KENNEDY

The available data is very convincing that the Thomas Clark named in this ad is the same Thomas Clark (sometimes spelled Clarke in directories and the census) who made planes in Pittsburgh from 1818 or 1819 through at least 1850. One of the best clues is the 1850 census, which lists Clark’s birthplace as Connecticut. Further, his age in the 1850 census was listed as 53, which would have made him 21 in 1818 when the Hartford ad appeared.

We know very little about how the Pittsburgh planemakers learned their trade. Evans probably learned from Scott, but Clark — assuming he is the Clark in question — is the only planemaker whose apprenticeship can be traced back to New England, where American planemaking began in the 18th century.

Little else is known about Thomas Clark. The first reference is the directory of 1819, where he is identified as a planemaker at the firm of Swetman & Hughes, a short-lived partnership which included several tradesmen who later went into business for themselves. Clark was listed independently in the 1826 directory as a planemaker on the east side of Penn below Irwin’s Alley. In the 1839 directory, he is listed as a planemaker on Fountain Street; by 1847, this planemaker lived at a “boarding house and dwelling on Hand St.”

The censuses before 1850 aren’t much help. There are many Thomas Clarks, and information about them is scant. The 1850 census finds Thomas Clarke, “Plain Maker,” and his family living in Allegheny, including Mary, 48, probably his wife. The 1850 census is the last official record of Thomas Clark found so far. The 1856 directory shows a Mary Ann Clark, widowed, living at 18 Weigh-lock Alley between Lacock and Canal in Allegheny.

Surviving planes attributed to Thomas Clark all carry the simple imprint “T.CLARK,” with no location. Because most of them have been found in the Pittsburgh area, it is assumed they were made by our man. Among the planes collected by the writer is a handled crown molding plane with “A. EASLY,” the owner, stamped on it. The 1847 directory lists a Mr. Easly as a carpenter with a dwelling house on Canal above Bridge and the directories of 1861-64 list Andrew Easly as a carpenter on Perry near Chestnut. The Allegheny address on Canal would have put Easly within easy proximity of Clark.

OTHER PITTSBURGH PLANEMAKERS

Not much information aside from directory listings has been found about the other craftsmen identified as planemakers practicing their trade in Pittsburgh prior to 1850. They include:

• John Barclay, who might be the John M. Barkly who was later identified as a Baltimore planemaker. All the imprints have the latter spelling, but spellings in early directories are unreliable. At any rate, John Barclay was listed in the 1815 Pittsburgh directory as a planemaker.

• John M’Cully was listed in the 1815 directory as a carpenter. Planes have been found with the imprint “J.M’CULLY PITTSBURGH,” which
Molding planes, above, created decorative door and window trim, crown molding trim, or baseboard trim. Thomas Clark began crafting such planes in Pittsburgh in 1818 or 1819, and later lived in Allegheny City.

Top, The plane's owner, Andrew Easly, put his stamp on it. Inset (left to right): A variety of planes — the first three by William Scott — to be found in an early 19th century carpenter's chest. A moving filetster, far left, with adjustable cutting width, cut a lap in the edge of a board, which when joined at right angles to a similarly cut board formed an overlapping joint.

The adjustable screw-arm sash plane made window sashes. A two-way tongue and groove plane formed joints for attaching boards to one another — in flooring, for instance. Pushed one way, the plane cut a tongue which fit into a groove formed by pushing the plane the opposite direction. The last plane, by Walter Lithgow in 1813 or earlier, is a dado plane, which cut grooves across the grain of the wood. A spur inserted along the sole in front of the cutting edge (barely visible) reduced the chance of splintering when the wood was cut.
REGIONAL PLANEMAKERS

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EVERAL OTHER planemakers practiced
in the region around Pittsburgh. The
number of surviving planes from at least
two of them indicate they ran successful operations
for a few years at least.

James Coates was a planemaker in Washington,
Pa., with working dates from about 1846 to 1860.
His planes are imprinted “J. COATES” and some-
times also carry the imprint “Washington Factory.”
A wide variety of his planes survive, including large
crown molding planes.

William Steel made planes in Wheeling while
that city was still part of Virginia. His main produc-
tion occurred from 1838 to 1851. Thereafter, he was
a partner in various enterprises making machinery
for cooper (barrelmakers) and woodworkers. He
received at least two patents for his design improve-
ments for mortice and tenoning machines. He was
a prolific producer of planes until local hardware
companies began importing planes from the Ohio
Tool Co. of Columbus, O., which supplied low-cost
planes by using prison labor.

William Thompson is the name of a
planemaker who imprinted his planes with an
abbreviation of Steubenville, O. His planes are very
rare. He was probably the carpenter of the same
name who is listed in an 1850 directory for
Steubenville.

Henry H. Clark, of Mercer, Pa., was listed as a
“woodturner” in the 1850 census. A couple of
planes have turned up marked “H.H. Clark
Mercer.” A number of Clarks in the Mercer area are
known to have been early producers of fine
cabinetry and chairs.

indicates he made planes for sale to other carpenters.

• Swetman & Hughes (James Swetman and William P.
Hughes) produced planes with the imprint of their partnership.
They employed Thomas Clark, Samuel H. Richmond and Ben-
jamin King, and were in business only a short time, being listed in
the directory of 1819. Clark went out on his own and King moved
to Cincinnati, but not all of his planes bear “Cincinnati” on them,
which means some could have been made in Pittsburgh. No planes
have surfaced with the name of Richmond. A few planes have
been found with the name of Swetman alone, but no planes have
been found with the name of Hughes alone.

• The name of John Star, “plain maker,” appears on an 1818
Pittsburgh tax list. This is all that is known about him. The guess is
that he also worked for Swetman & Hughes, or perhaps Evans or
Scott. He may be related to James Starr, who made planes around
1850 in the eastern Ohio town of New Lisbon (now Lisbon).

• A later partnership was listed in the 1837 census under Bright
and Chappell, and planes are found with the marking “A. BRIGHT
& J. CHAPPELL.” Nothing further is known about Bright. James
Chappell was listed under his own name as a planemaker in the
1837 directory, and planes exist with his name alone.

• William Wilson is the last of the wood planemakers, listed as
an Allegheny resident in the 1847 directory and for 15 years
thereafter. His planes are imprinted with his last name only,
preceded by a small heart, which leads one to wonder whether he
learned his trade from Evans, who used a heart in his imprint.