

CONNECTICUT PLAIN HIGH-STYLE SEAT FURNITURE OF THE 18th CENTURY

Robert F. Trent

The Connecticut Historical Society's recent exhibition and catalogue, *New London County Joined Chairs 1720–1790*, traced the development of a number of interrelated shop traditions in towns along the Connecticut River and in regional centres of New London County in the eastern half of the state. Connecticut chairs have never enjoyed much popularity among dealers and collectors, who undoubtedly will persist in being unmoved by them, but furniture historians in America and Great Britain have reason to be compelled by the chairs. The assumption might be (and has been) that all Connecticut furniture dimly reflects what Americans deem 'metropolitan' work — that is, furniture production in Boston, Newport, New York City, and Philadelphia — but compositional analysis and an increasing awareness of the existence of plain London joinery has led this writer and others to conclude that imported English chairs often had a decisive impact in provincial Connecticut, even when the same workmen relied on designs from the great American ports for their case furniture and tables.

Let's examine one of the shop traditions featured in the catalogue. The shop tradition previously was thought to have been restricted to Wethersfield, a wealthy agricultural town and river port just south of Hartford on the Connecticut River. A well-known set of chairs that belonged to Colonel Thomas Belden (1732–82) of Wethersfield is now divided among the Brooklyn Museum, Yale University Art Gallery, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Among the index features are crooked backs, vase banisters with beads at the throat, through tenons at the junction of the side seat rails and rear posts, rear seat rails set markedly above the side seat rails rather than at the same level (as seen in the rear view of Fig. 3), and meticulous modelling.

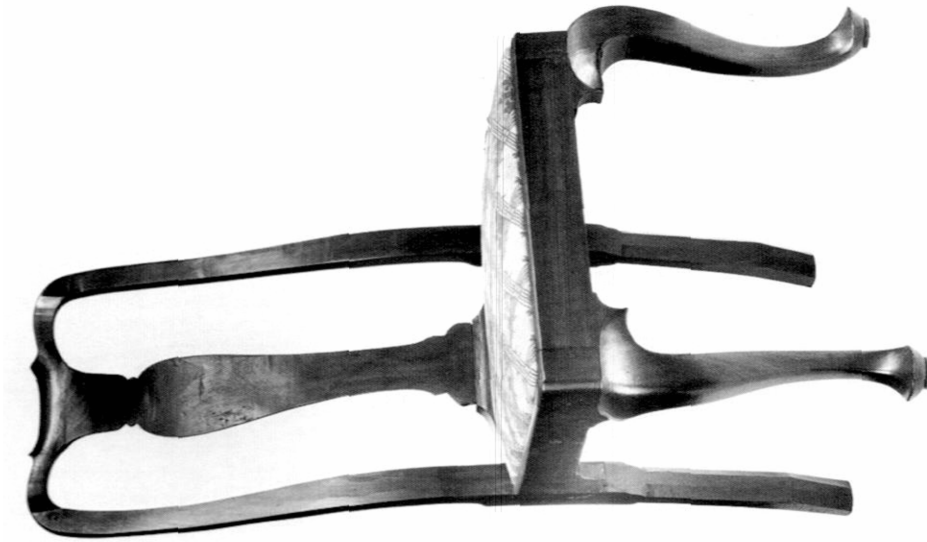
The Belden set, as well as an intriguing set that descended from Sarah Chester Noyes (1722–97) of Wethersfield (Fig. 1), employ what American scholars call a flatwise seat frame construction, wherein the rails are laid with their broader dimension on the horizontal plane, united at the front corners by mortise-and-tenon joints, and connected to the front legs by round tenons atop the legs that are plugged up into the seat rails. This construction, formerly associated with Philadelphia influence in America, now is thought by scholars like the late Benno M. Forman and Desiree Caldwell to reflect metropolitan English chairmaking heavily influenced by Germanic techniques. (Similar constructions can be found in easy chairs and case pieces.) The Chester chair sports double-swept side rails of distinctly metropolitan form.

The same shop tradition produced chairs with trapezoidal or square-cornered seats framed in the English manner, with vertically-oriented seat rails tenoned into projections atop the front legs (Fig. 2), and surprisingly, English seat construction persisted in some

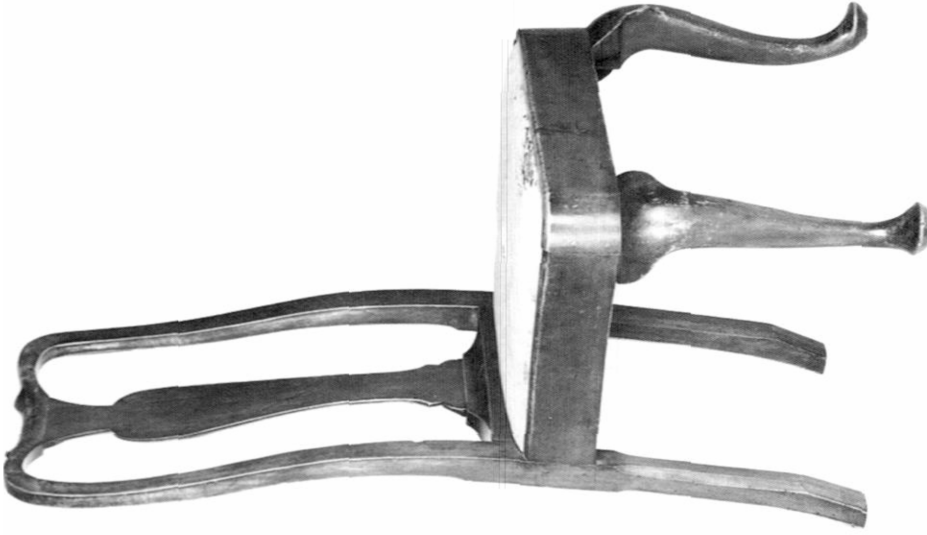


1. Joined chair, with loose worked seat, Wethersfield, Connecticut,
1750-60, birch

Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum, Wethersfield, Connecticut



2. Joined chair with loose seat, possibly Saybrook, Connecticut,
1735-70. Santo Domingo mahogany and maple
Leffingwell Inn, Norwich, Connecticut



3. Joined chair with loose worked seat, Wethersfield,
Connecticut, 1735-70, cherry and maple
Private collection

examples with compass or horseshoe-shaped seats, where flatwise construction would seem most appropriate (Fig. 3).

Related shops in Saybrook at the mouth of the Connecticut River some forty miles south of Wethersfield were responsible for extraordinarily slim versions of the same chairs with pared-down elements (Fig 4). The only known pair of chairs from these shops embodies an 'error.' The mortise cheeks for the rear leg joints are not cut on the intended slight forward bias, with the result that the rear feet are drawn too far forward and the backs pitch too far to the rear. Note that when flatwise seat construction is employed, as in Fig. 1, it is customary to apply lips around the perimeter of the seat frame to contain the slip seats. The Saybrook maker or makers employed this technique on the seats of the chair in Figure 4 even though it is framed in the English manner, where rabbets ploughed on the inner edges of the seat rails are the rule for containing slip seats. Case pieces and tables from the Saybrook shop tradition (Fig. 5) display the same slim lines and odd construction techniques. The compositions are in effect William and Mary designs with crooked or cabriole legs grafted on, an indication that this design complex had its inception in England about 1705 to 1715. Not that it ought to be considered a frozen 'transitional' style — those London workmen formulating designs soon after the turn of the eighteenth century had no such notion.

The case pieces further complicate matters, for they are directly related to the products of still other shops in Stonington on the coast near the Rhode Island border and in Preston, an inland town near the New London County economic centre at Norwich on the Thames River. Stonington and Preston high chests and dressing tables are heavily influenced by Newport practice, although they have a number of distinctive features they share with the Saybrook dressing table illustrated here. What the exact relationships among all these shops were is not clear, nor have the workmen been satisfactorily identified. Furthermore, a strong group of seating associated with the river town of Middletown, situated halfway between Hartford and Saybrook on the Connecticut River, is also patently part of this greater complex of shops.

Wherein resides the significance of these chairs and other objects for RFS members in Great Britain? First, these urbane but exaggerated chairs call for a more nuanced explanation than mere 'transmission'. The plain London joinery from which they are derived is little studied in England or America, and only fieldwork in England based on analysis of surviving monuments in provincial areas will ever identify the perimeters of London joinery intended for middling levels of the market (and, not coincidentally, for export to the colonies). The writer urges his English counterparts to pursue such leads in the natural course of their work in provincial schools, for, as the late Benno M. Forman amply demonstrated, only the echoes of metropolitan work in provincial and colonial centres will permit us to identify it. If such a complicated development of fairly expensive joined seating could take place in Connecticut, where the overwhelming majority of the population made do with turned chairs, then imagine what must have transpired in the opportunistic shops of the imperial capital.

Second, a perennial problem is assessing the degree to which such chair designs of the 1700–30 period reflect Chinese design sources. Numerous authors have alluded to such sources, but proof for these assertions in the form of closely-dated Far Eastern prototypes and concrete instances of importation and emulation have not been forthcoming. The swift adoption of 'Queen Anne' attributes by provincial workmen makes this topic entirely



4. Joined chair with loose leather seat. Saybrook, Connecticut, 1740-70, maple
The Connecticut Historical Society



5. Dressing table. Saybrook, Connecticut, 1740–70, maple and cherry
The Connecticut Historical Society

appropriate for those interested in provincial and folk levels of conceptualisation and production, for, after all, these levels only have meaning in relation to precisely designated metropolitan centres of design. The refusal to accept presentist standards of taste and appreciation for certain schools and levels of production is what will fuel provincial furniture studies with renewed energy and insights.

To return to the chairs in question, none of them have carved shells or leafage at the crest or knees, nor do they display the fanciful veneering found on London examples. Boston and New York chairs often do have such carving or veneering. On the one hand, such ornament was not difficult to execute and undoubtedly did not cost all that much more as an option, but on the other hand, provincial price levels were severely restricted by lower wealth levels and by pietistic injunctions against ostentation (it goes without saying that such pietistic

injunctions were not exclusive to 'Puritan' New England). The question then arises, were these Connecticut chairs merely stripped down versions of Boston or London designs, or were they modelled on metropolitan work calculated to appeal to a middle-class clientele, wherever situated? Clearly the latter possibility has a lot more credibility, and the identification of these trend-setting shops in London, which had far greater influence in absolute numbers than those catering to the court and nobility, is of the utmost interest.

American scholars attempting fieldwork in England have encountered obstacles when attempting to find plain metropolitan work. Bradford Rauschenberg of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, found that he could not identify a single eighteenth-century precedent for Southern colonial furniture during his recent survey stay in England, for example. Surely middle-class furniture of the sort so important to American scholars exists, and just as surely RFS members working their local areas in connection with various projects are walking right on by it! Please let's enhance our awareness of production on both sides of the Atlantic and in continental Europe to the point that we can recognise prototypes and analogues for colonial American objects, and in return, Americans can hone their eyes for significant English monuments, which as we all know are being hauled over to the United States by the container load weekly.