

# The Forest Chair in Colonial America

This note concerns the origin and early history of the Windsor chair in America, a subject about which very little is known. For a variety of reasons this topic has proved to be too difficult to pursue any further from the UK. Hopefully though, Society members in USA with access to American archives may be able to advance this research and throw new light on this little studied aspect of furniture history.

It has been suggested that by the time of the revolution the American Windsor had become 'the most popular form of furniture in the Colonies and perhaps the most popular form of furniture ever to be made in America'.<sup>1</sup> However, although the American Windsor differs from the English Windsor in many ways it exhibits several features in common with the Forest chair, the green painted garden chair that was the predecessor of the English Windsor.<sup>2</sup> In particular, American Windsor chairs were usually painted green up to about 1780 and both types of chair were stick-backs with turned legs. This suggests that the design of the American Windsor was probably originally based on English Forest chairs imported by Colonial settlers. Notably however, although the term 'Windsor' was used to describe American chairs in the 1730's the use of 'Forest' to refer to these chairs has not previously been recorded.

The earliest known reference to a Windsor chair in America comes from the 1734 inventory for John Lloyd of Charleston, South Carolina, which lists '3 Open Windsor chairs' valued at £3.<sup>3</sup> The connection with Charleston may be significant as it was the capital of South Carolina, originally named 'Charles Town' after King Charles II, and the most important port in the southern Colonies with trading links to England, the northern Colonies, Portugal and the West Indies. Fortunes were made, especially by rice and indigo planters who then built themselves large mansions. John Lloyd, for example, was a successful lawyer, merchant and planter who from 1721 to 1723 was employed as one of two 'agents' for South Carolina. He spent much of that time in London lobbying the Board of Trade and Plantations, as well as King's secretaries of state, on behalf of the Colony's interests.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it seems highly probable that he would have been aware of the new English vogue for garden Windsor (i.e. Forest) chairs and may well have imported some himself. It is perhaps worth

noting that English Forest chairs were purchased by the aristocracy for use in their country house gardens. They remained popular throughout most of the 18th century and were often shown in 'conversation piece' paintings.

A particularly interesting piece of information comes from the probate inventory of Andrew Allen (1666–1735), deceased, in the parish of St Philip, Charles Town.<sup>5</sup> The inventory is dated the 19th day of October 1735 and on the first page is listed 'An Old Forest Chair' appraised at '1 pound'. Allen was a prosperous Scottish merchant who arrived in Charleston from Barbados before 1708. He subsequently acquired a lot of land, including a countryseat at Goose Creek (15 miles from Charleston), and elevated himself to the 'planter class'.<sup>6</sup> He also seems to have been heavily involved in the import/export business and was a friend and ally of Francis Nicholson, Governor of South Carolina 1721–25, who fancied himself as a man of taste. Therefore Allen, like Lloyd, could well have been the sort of individual who might have imported furniture from England. However, there is also the possibility that the Forest chair mentioned in the inventory may have come from a different source.

In 1724 Andrew Allen and one William Gibbon formed a partnership to purchase Thorogood, a plantation of 3000 acres, and one of the first in Berkeley County.<sup>7</sup> The acquisition included 'all Negro, Mulatto, Indian and other slaves; all livestock, goods and chattels; all lands, tenements, goods and slaves in St Philips and St James parishes' and, when Gibbon died in 1725, Allen assumed full ownership of the estate. Possibly, therefore, the 'old' Forest chair referred to in the 1735 inventory came originally from the Thorogood estate in 1724. Also, it is interesting to note that although Allen's inventory listed several other types of chair (11 plain cane chairs, 13 old cane chairs, 9 broken chairs) the single Forest chair, though old, was considered worth mentioning on the first page. The significance of this is that this Forest chair can only have been imported from England where the term 'Forrest' was used in the 1720's to refer to a garden Windsor chair.<sup>8</sup> Hence, a search for 'Forest chairs' in American Colonial archives from the early 18th century may be a useful approach for the furtherance of this research.

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1 Santore, C., *The Windsor Style in America* (Running Press, 1997), p. 30.

2 Parrott, R. F., *Regional Furniture*, xxiv (2010), pp. 1–17.

3 Evans, N. G., *American Windsor Chairs* (Hudson Hill Press, 1996), p. 65.

4 Dr N. Butler (personal communication).

5 S. P. Perry (personal communication).

6 Dr N. Butler (personal communication).

7 M. J. Heitzler, *Goose Creek a Definitive History*, vol. 1, *Planters, Politicians and Patriots* (2005), p. 257.

8 Parrott, R. F., *Regional Furniture*, xxiv (2010), pp. 1–17.