

An Extensive, Freely Available, Online Database of Wills, Inventories and Accounts from Maryland, USA

During research into chair making in the thirteen British Colonies of North America in the early eighteenth century I came across a remarkable website from the State of Maryland which will be of considerable interest to those researching American material culture (*as well as those in the UK, for the terminology was the same. Ed.*). I was mainly concerned with inventory records and none of those that I looked at had been transcribed. Instead, what are available are photographs of paired pages from the original documents that appear to have been made on microfilm in 1946. These records, which span the period from 1676 to 1764, provide an enormously valuable research resource that can be easily accessed via the Internet.

The procedure for viewing these records is as follows. The first step is to do a Google search for 'huntington collection of maryland state archives'. Next, click on '**Huntington Collection of Maryland State Archives Security Microfilm**' to display the TE 1 series (legacy nos. 1-100 comprising 256 items) in a grey shaded table. From this table the data set for a particular item (i.e. a will, inventory or account) over a given time period can be selected. To display the contents (of a given legacy number section) it is necessary to follow the instruction 'Click Here For Additional Links' which lists (in blue) the volumes of records available in the period chosen. Then, by clicking on one of these a photograph of the first one or two pages from the original document will be brought up. It is then possible to select any pair of pages by going backwards or forwards and also to enlarge and, if necessary print, what is on the screen. Also, at the end of each inventory volume there is an alphabetical index giving the name of the deceased and the page number where the respective inventory can be found. (Note that the paired page numbers actually viewed are given with the legacy number in black under a purple heading and differ from those written in the books). Most of the records are nicely written in clear script however it is not possible to do a word search, as with some other electronic archive sources.

My particular interest was to look for early records of Windsor chairs in probate inventories. To do this a search was made of more than 4000 inventories spanning the period from 1718 to 1736; however, no mention of Windsor or Forrest chairs was found. These inventories though are very thorough, recording even the most

mundane items. Also, the belongings listed for each of the deceased are remarkably similar and appear, in the main, to be the property of smallholders. Most of the inventories record limited items of furniture such as beds, oval tables, chests of drawers, spinning wheels, looking glasses and various types of chair. Much of the furniture appears to have been made locally in black (American walnut) and in many cases there are long lists of various types of cloth and textiles. The inventories list all kinds of livestock and also, frequently, Negro slaves.

One of the reasons why there was no record of Windsor-type chairs in the probate inventories maybe because most were those of self-sufficient farmers with too small an income to keep up with the latest English fashions. In fact, there were only a small number of inventories from plantations where the dwellings were large and the household contents were listed on a room-by-room basis. With regard to chairs, some of those most frequently mentioned were various types of Cane, Flagg (-bottom), (Russia) Leather and Wooden chairs. Only one instance of imported chairs and garden furniture was found; a 1722 inventory noted '½ doz English flag chairs (at 2/6 per ½ dozen), 14 English Common Chairs £1-8 and 4 Fine Lawn Benches.'

As an example of the richness of the information to be found in these archives the following is a list some of the types of chair descriptions I noticed: Black Walnut, Matted, Rush (bottom), Turkey work, Cloth covered, Elbow, Wicker, Wainscot, Straw, Old country flag bottomed, Childrens, Large wooden bottom, Dear (*sic*) Leather, Old Arm'd, New England made bass bottom, Rush leather double naild, Old cloth bottom, Turn'd wooden bottom'd, Groaning (i.e. Birthing), Old ordinary, Black and White new England, New fashionable Rushy Leather, Cherry tree frames, Old easy, Black Cain with Cushions, Walnut frame Easy covered with red Turkey Leather, Walnut frame with black Spanish Leather Seats, Great Plank, Covered in Serge, Russia Leather with Scallop'd backs, Sheep skin, Walnut matted, Sacking backs and bottoms with red Camblet Covers, Joyners, Easy covered with Silk Damask, Black and White Rush (spellings as per the original)

Probate inventories are particularly useful for furniture history research although, as with the Maryland archives, many remain to be transcribed. Unfortunately also, few of those that have been transcribed are currently available on the Internet. The value of the Huntington collection, however, lies in its enormous scope and the fact that it can be so easily perused. Hopefully others will find these archives as useful and fascinating as I have.

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