

# *Many Hands, Many Dialects: The State of Regional Furniture Studies in America*, a talk given by Daniel Ackermann

Recently Daniel Ackermann of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) in North Carolina, became the Society's new American Secretary (see *RFS Newsletter* 65) and we all really appreciated both his presence, with his wife Melissa, throughout the Conference and his lecture on the Friday evening, 1 July 2016..

Having introduced us to the geography of the South, Daniel described the pre-WWII belief that American's cultural output came solely from Boston, New York and Philadelphia. To challenge this an antique dealer, Frank L Horton, and his mother had already begun to collect regional material. In response to the first Colonial Williamsburg Antiques Forum where it was lamented that so little was known of Southern furniture Frank Horton eventually established their museum at Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1964 with an endowment to fund MESDA. From the start there was a lively programme of outreach research to record all relevant items of Southern furniture in private ownership. This included a full physical description of each piece, its constructional details and provenance, together with a black-and-white photograph. Eventually some two thousand items had been recorded and this information is now becoming readily available on-line.

Since many artefacts had come from Britain and there were still many who were uncertain of whether furniture was really made in the South that a survey visit to the UK was undertaken in the early 1980s, in addition to reading through as many wills, inventories, and newspaper advertisements as possible in order to record makers details. So far it has been able to register some 85,000 craftsmen working in 120 traditional trades; of these some 614 English, 177 Irish, 60 Scots and 11 Welsh turners and carpenters were uncovered in the South, along with others from France and Germany. Using this evidence, along with a fine selection of provenanced pieces, Daniel was able to tell the stories of a number of British apprenticed craftsmen, describing how they transported and adapted their British designs and practices to suit American requirements, diverse communities and materials. One particularly appropriate individual was William Little, of Carlisle, who, after his apprenticeship in the city, moved across the country to Newcastle to buy his planes. Then Little went out to Norfolk, Virginia, and then onto Charleston, South Carolina, where he worked with John

Watson. His later business at Sneedsboro, N. Carolina, proved so successful that he was eventually able to give up joinery and become a well-to-do planter.

The furtherance of such invaluable research to elucidate personal histories of craftsmen and their products will only be possible through widespread cooperation between similar institutions and their curators. A number of these are now putting their information on-line, including:

The Boston Furniture Archive

Rhode Island Furniture Archive

Kentucky On-Line Arts Resource

Texan Artizans & Artists Archive

Arkansas Made

And the Harbinson Collection in Canada investigates the Anglo-French cultures of Canada.

Of course, such research has to be combined with the actual material culture of the South, and so MESDA had completely redeveloped its premises over the last eight years to create an impressive series of thematic and didactic galleries to present its collections to both scholars and the general public.

Throughout his lecture Daniel had set before us a constant stream of images of America's finest regional furniture – visually confirming the exciting ways in which British traditions were free to flourish anew in the South. Our appreciation was confirmed by prolonged applause – and we look forward to renewing our meeting Daniel and Melissa over the coming years and hearing more of what is happening 'across the pond'.

The MESDA website address is: [mesda.org/research/craftsmen-database/](http://mesda.org/research/craftsmen-database/)

*Peter Brears*