

## A Forest chair in Colonial America: Work in Progress

A notable difference between English and American Windsor chairs is that English chairs, particularly 18th-century Windsors made in the Thames Valley and London, seem to have been bought by the well-to-do and are scarce today. In contrast, 18th-century American Windsors were made in large numbers for all members of society; this was something that did not happen in England until the 19th century. In fact, it has been suggested that by the time of the Revolution the American Windsor chair had become 'the single 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> Interestingly, the American Windsor seems to have more in common with the English Forest chair than the typical English Windsor. Characteristically, American chairs are normally of stick-back form, i.e. without back splats, like most Forest chairs, and are nearly always painted, as were English Forest chairs. The legs are markedly splayed and invariably turned,

though more elaborately than on both types of English chair. The cabriole leg, which is frequently found on 18th-century English Windsors, was never used.

An explanation for some of the above differences could be that the first American-made Windsors were copied from English Forest chairs imported by wealthy English Colonists who wished to keep up with the new English fashion for portable garden seats. For example, Gillows' records mention six partly-assembled Windsor chairs exported to Barbados in 1775 with instructions that they were to be glued together and painted green on board ship.<sup>2</sup> Today we would recognise these painted Windsors as 'Forest chairs'. Also, in this connection, a reference to 'An Old Forest Chair' appraised at '1 pound' has recently been found in an American probate inventory dated the 19th day of October, 1735.<sup>3</sup> This inventory was drawn up following the death of Andrew Allen, a prosperous Scottish merchant who joined the 'planter class' and acquired a lot of land at Goose Creek near Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the chair was said to be 'old' in 1735 could be because it was imported by Allen some time earlier, or because it came



Thames Valley 'shawl-back' comb-back Windsor, late 18th-century (Photo Bob Parrott)



American Rhode Island style 'sack-back' comb-back Windsor, late 18th-century. Courtesy of American Museum in Britain, Bath

from the 3000 acre Thorogood plantation that Allen and one William Gibbon purchased with all its slaves, livestock, goods and chattels in 1724. If so, this would predate the earliest American references to Windsor-type chairs, i.e. 1734.<sup>5</sup>

In conclusion it is suggested that imports of 18th-century English garden Windsors (Forest chairs) into America and its Colonies provided the model for a type of chair ideally suited to the American climate and lifestyle and which was soon modified by local craftsmen. Hence, searches 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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<sup>1</sup> C. Santore, *The Windsor style in America*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, Pa.: Running Press, 1997), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> S. Stuart, 'More about Gillows' Windsor and Common Chairs.' *Regional Furniture*, vol. 24 (2010), p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> S. P. Perry (Personal communication: Northwestern University Library, Illinois).

<sup>4</sup> N. Butler (Personal communication: The Charleston Archive).

<sup>5</sup> N. G. Evans, *American Windsor Chairs* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1996).