

## CHRISTOPHER GILBERT MEMORIAL LECTURE

18th October 2003

This year's Annual Lecture was given by Professor Charles Hummel, best known as the author of *With Hammer in Hand. The Dominy Craftsmen of East Hampton, New York*, published in 1968. He has had a long and distinguished career at Winterthur Museum in Delaware and as Professor of Art History and History at the University of Delaware. We were delighted to welcome him to England to give the third Christopher Gilbert Memorial Lecture, which took place at Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College in High Wycombe on Saturday 18th October.

It was a privilege to hear Charles give not one, but two lectures, revealing his careful and detailed research into the Dominy family. In the first he painted a picture for us of the economic, social and cultural context within which four generations of the Dominys lived and worked, from the early 18th century to the mid 19th, and in the second he dealt specifically with the furniture they made. (It is perhaps worth recording here that Charles also delivered a lecture earlier in the week to the Antiquarian Horological Society on the Dominys' clockmaking activities.)

From the collection of some 2,000 tools and workshop items, over 200 documents and over 100 objects known to have been made by the Dominys, all of which was

acquired by Winterthur in the 1950s and subsequently, Charles has pieced together, in extraordinary detail, the way in which a family living in a rural community on Long Island was able to prosper by making a wide range of wooden and metal items, from farm tools to clocks and furniture, needed by the people who lived nearby, not just on Long Island but across the Sound in coastal Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. The first Nathaniel Dominy had settled in East Hampton in 1669. Nathaniel III (1714-1778), according to family histories, was a carpenter and clockmaker but few records of him survive. Charles' research has therefore focused on the next three generations, Nathaniel IV (1737-1812) and V (1770-1852) and Felix (1800-1868).

East Hampton was a small town in an agricultural community, with a population in 1776 of only 1,250 people. As was common amongst rural craftsmen, the Dominys mixed farming with craft to make a living, and to a large extent they were self-sufficient in food and woollen cloth. Many of their customers paid with farm produce rather than cash, using a system of barter and exchange. The Dominys made and/or repaired farm tools, fishing gear, guns, spinning wheels and looms, and even built and repaired windmills and sawmills, but their main business was as cabinet makers and clockmakers. The skills were passed from father to son and grandson, Nathaniel IV in repairing and making clocks and watches, his son Nathaniel V specialising in woodwork while encouraging his own son Felix to take on clocks and watches and other metalwork.

In the context of this agricultural community the need for material goods came second to the more practical requirements for food, shelter and tools. East Hampton was isolated, remote from centres of fashion, and its people were largely content with the traditions of their ancestors. The Dominys made plain and functional furniture both to suit their customers' needs and at a price they could afford. Much of it was made on lathes, either a pole lathe or the great wheel lathe, which forms one of the most striking exhibits in the reconstructed workshop at Winterthur.

Amongst the furniture recorded in the Dominy accounts are over 350 chairs, including the least expensive 'slat back' chairs for 4s to 6s a piece. At this period materials were expensive compared to labour and Charles has calculated that these chairs must have been made in 2 to 3 hours to produce a reasonable profit. The Dominys also made rocking chairs and the commonest type of chairs in that part of colonial America at the time, variously described today as splatback, fiddleback, York or Hudson Valley type chairs, for which templates for the crest-rails and splats survive in the Dominy collection. Chairs of this type appear to have sold for around 9s for a side chair and twice that for an armchair. Other furniture listed in the accounts include candle-stands and tea tables with circular, dished tops turned on the lathe and tripod legs, a number of which survive, made by Nathaniel V, as

well as chests-on-chests, which sold for between £7 and £11, and desks. The surviving furniture illustrates the slow pace of change in rural America, with the design of case furniture changing very little over much of the 18th century.

Charles' assessment is that the Dominys had superlative woodworking skills which were seldom challenged by their customers, who above all wanted 'neat' furniture, which meant it was elegant in form and arrangement, free of embellishments, of agreeable and simple appearance, and nicely made and proportioned. It was Felix Dominy, who aged 21 wrote 'With Hammer in Hand/All Arts do Stand/All Arts do Stand/With Hammer in Hand'. He realised that steam-powered manufacturing would eclipse the rural workshop and left East Hampton in 1835. Remarkably the house and workshop survived in the family until 1946, the last resident being Robert Dominy, and today the collection of furniture, clocks, tools and accounts form one of the most comprehensive groups of material relating to a family workshop anywhere, and it has benefited from many years of Charles' painstaking and meticulous research, which clearly he continues to this day.

Our deepest thanks to Professor Charles Hummel for two masterly lectures.

*David Dewing*