

THE FURNITURE MASTERWORKS OF JOHN & THOMAS SEYMOUR BY ROBERT D MUSSEY JR.
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John Seymour, a carpenter, joiner and furniture maker, emigrated with his family from Axminster, Devon in 1784 and set up in business in Falmouth (Portland), Maine and later in Boston, Mass. With one of his sons, Thomas, who was aged 13 when they emigrated, they played a very significant role in shaping the neo-classical style of American furniture during the Federal period and into the 1820s.

Robert Mussey, whose conservation workshops were highly regarded by members of the Society who took part in our New England study tour in 1996, has spent a decade meticulously researching the Seymours and their furniture on both sides of the Atlantic. The result is a weighty and beautifully produced volume, in spite of Robert's apologies for not being able to fit into it all his research material.

The wonders of modern technology, however, allow for a website (www.pem.org/luxury) where one can experience short videos on the Seymours' techniques in planing, veneering, inlaying and dovetailing, further information on six other topics in sound and pictures, and a 32-page index to the book, which can be downloaded.

Of particular interest to members will be the book's emphasis on how John Seymour's familiarity with English/West Country furniture continued to be

shown. Indeed it was consciously maintained in construction methods and choice of timbers, as they developed their own sophisticated style and meticulous craftsmanship: more perhaps than any other British immigrant makers.

Faced with their penchant for endless variations on basic models, Robert has made a thorough reassessment of known and attributed Seymour pieces, only a few of which are labelled or signed, and has identified distinctive patterns of construction, woods, inlay and design. On this basis further attributions can be made, with the caveat that the increasing use of sub-contractors and short-term journeymen in workshops can on occasion complicate judgements.

The main body of the text comprises a catalogue of 156 representative pieces, which show that the Seymours encompassed almost every area of furniture making, each accompanied by a clear photograph, almost all in colour. The systematic detective work is so absorbing that one craves more detailed shots, besides those included in the introductory chapters. A majority of the pieces, although shadowing English developments, have a distinctive American 'look', but there are some that follow Sheraton or other English forms so closely, such as Cumberland dining tables (96-7), the sofa table (93) or dining chair (122), that, without the aid of wood analysis, their origins become very difficult to be certain about and all the more intriguing because of it.

Few at the craft end of furniture manufacture have ever made their fortune, but it is perhaps surprising that the Seymours were so dogged throughout by economic hardship. Maybe the outstanding quality of their work, buoyed up by the pressures of intense competition in Boston, was just too meticulous and expensive for the local clientele at the time. With their lack of capital, despite their initially ambitious furniture warehouse in Boston, Thomas was forced to close the business in 1817 and end his working days as a foreman in other workshops, before he died in 1849. However the Seymours' excellence was never compromised and this highly recommended book admirably demonstrates the splendid legacy that they left behind them.

Christopher Claxton Stevens