

## CHRISTOPHER GILBERT MEMORIAL LECTURE

Olympia Exhibition Centre, London, 13th June 2005

'John & Thomas Seymour, cabinet-makers: British  
Lions in America'

This lecture, the fifth in the series, was given by Robert D. Mussey Jr., one of the foremost furniture conservators in America and the author of *'The Furniture Masterworks of John and Thomas Seymour'*.

In September 1784, John Seymour, a journeyman carpenter and joiner, left his home in Axminster, Devon, and emigrated to the small seaport town of Falmouth, Maine. He was then 46 years of age. By December 1784, he was working as a cabinet-maker in Falmouth (renamed Portland in 1786) and soon able to send for his wife and family.

During his time in Portland (1784-1792) Seymour acquired a closely interwoven and élite clientele among the leading merchant families that lived there. From various papers it is seen that cabinet-making accounted for nearly 75 per cent of Seymour's earnings, but he also performed the full range of 18th century joinery tasks, repaired furniture, carried out household repairs and ship-related work. In all this he was assisted by his sons John, Thomas and Joseph.

In the period 1790/1792 Seymour's Portland patrons struggled with debt as the town rebuilt after its complete destruction by the British Navy in 1775. In 1792, Seymour's eldest son, John Jr. died unexpectedly when about 27 years of age. John Seymour was now 55 and had continuing ambitions for himself and Thomas, now 22, so he moved with his family to Boston where his second son, Joseph, was working as an engraver.

In Boston, John and Thomas Seymour found an increased number of commissions for their elaborate and finely worked furniture; there was also a continued demand in Maine for their pieces. The Seymour's offerings in their first decade included pieces that relate closely to published English designs. Their copies of Sheraton's *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book* (1791-93), signed by Thomas, are held by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Six pieces of furniture bearing the label of John Seymour & Son, Cabinet Makers are now known. Items from Creek Square, Boston, appear to date between 1793 and 1795. All but one are ambitious in design and ornament with refined and sometimes elaborate inlays and veneer work. All employ distinctively English methods of joinery, differing markedly from the typical Boston practice. English secondary wood preferences are reflected in varying combinations of ash, oak, walnut and cherry, in conjunction with the native eastern white pine as a secondary wood. Birch and maple were incorporated only occasionally in this early Boston period. Curly-satinwood veneer is frequently prominent, and also reflects a British tradition. The Seymours apparently reserved the labels primarily for their finest pieces of furniture.

Thomas married in December 1804 and within days announced the opening of his Boston Furniture Warehouse. The Seymours had begun to employ other immigrant artisans as sub-contractors prior to 1804 and during the 7 years of Thomas Seymour's Boston Furniture Warehouse he continued to rely on these men to supply their specialist skills. John Seymour was now 66 and he continued to work with his son, probably part-time, until 1808/09.

Thomas had two business partners in the warehouse venture, one departed after 7 months, the other within 3 years. Thomas now experienced financial problems that curtailed his activities and cabinet-making dominated his business in future years. When the building occupied by the Boston Furniture Warehouse was sold for redevelopment Thomas moved to Congress Street. He opened his new business, the Boston Cabinet Manufactory, on 30th May 1812 'when will be for sale Useful and Ornamental Cabinet Furniture all made under the direction of Thomas Seymour'.

At the end of the war with Great Britain in 1815 Thomas was still in business but with reduced resources and a clientele whose fortunes had been badly diminished by the war. Reflecting this, Thomas had closed his furniture manufactory by mid-1817.

John Seymour at this time was in the Boston almshouse where, in poverty and obscurity, he lived his last two years and died on 22nd August 1818.

Through the years 1817-1826 Thomas found employment as a foreman cabinet-maker with various firms in Boston but the last 23 years of his life are obscure. In straitened circumstances, Thomas and his family were living with his son, Thomas Hugh, in Boston. After the financial failure of Thomas Hugh in 1842, Thomas' wife Mary and their three unmarried daughters moved to the small farming town of Lunenburg, Massachusetts, where Thomas Seymour died on 9th May 1848 aged 77.

This was an excellent lecture, bringing together some 10 years of painstaking research and delivered in a manner which was both scholarly and entertaining.

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