

Jay Robert Stiefel, *The Cabinetmaker's Account, John Head's Record of Craft & Commerce in Colonial Philadelphia, 1718–1753*, The American Philosophical Society Press, Philadelphia, USA, 2019. 298 pp., 100 illustrations, mainly colour. ISBN 978-0-87169-271-9. \$85. Available online at <http://www.dianepublishing.net>

There's no question that Jay Stiefel has produced a remarkable book, one that satisfies on many levels: as an historical account of commercial activity in early eighteenth-century Philadelphia; as a study of one cabinet maker's life and business; and as a detailed analysis of the furniture which can now be ascribed to the workshop of John Head. Stiefel was the right person in the right place. His discovery of the parchment-bound account book in 1999 amongst the archives of the American Philosophical Society was a eureka moment for him and for furniture studies. Here was a detailed record of 35 years of a cabinetmaker's workshop, covering a period where no comparable record exists in

America or in Britain, found by a man whose experience, knowledge and passion could have been made for this opportunity. Stiefel's analysis of John Head's Account Book is enriched by the extent of his previous studies of early Philadelphian society and its artisans; many of the names in Head's accounts were already familiar, and here were snippets of information which, when linked with evidence from other sources, gave a fresh insight into their lives and trading activity.

Stiefel's early chapters describe the circumstances of the Account Book's survival amongst the Vaux family papers, donated to the library of the American Philosophical Society in 1991-2. The Vaux family, prominent Philadelphian Quakers, trace one line of their ancestry back to John Head Jr, the son of John Head the cabinetmaker. The significance of the Account Book was not recognised, however, and it lay undisturbed until Stiefel came across it in 1999. He saw its potential, 'a "Rosetta Stone" for deciphering the activities by which many Colonial craftsmen like Head bartered their way to becoming prosperous merchants.' Since that moment Stiefel has worked with curators, conservators and scholars to identify furniture which could be documented to Head's workshop, now amounting to over sixty pieces. Evidence of John Head's English background is thin: his family were Quakers and glovers in Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk; John was born in 1688, one of six children; he married Rebecca Mase in 1712, when he was described as a 'joyner', and they emigrated to America in 1717. Nothing has yet been found about his apprenticeship or of his work in England. One can only hope that more information will come to light. It would be fascinating to be able to draw comparisons between furniture he was making in England and the pieces we now know to have been by him in America.

The Account Book begins in 1718, shortly after John and his family landed in Philadelphia, and ends in 1753, a year before he died. It records his business transactions with customers and other tradesmen over a period of 35 years and is fascinating in revealing how much was done by barter and exchange of goods and services as opposed to cash, in a society where currency was always in short supply. No doubt Stiefel's legal training came into play in deciphering the often complex repayments, involving several transactions over many months and even years. Stiefel's attention to detail is excellent, but he also cleverly sets the Account Book in the context of other surviving documents on life and trade in early Colonial America, so we are given both detail and the wider picture; it is remarkable how much new information it provides.

In attributing furniture to the Head workshop, Stiefel draws on his earlier research into Philadelphia clockmaker, William Stretch who, as the Head accounts now show, obtained his long cases from Head; a notable example, ordered by glassmaker and property dealer Caspar Wistar in 1730, survives. Wistar also ordered a walnut high chest and dressing table in 1726, and these three pieces are firmly identified to Head both in the accounts and as extant furniture, serving as keys to further attributions. Seventeen clock cases have now been attributed to Head, out of a total of over sixty pieces of furniture now considered to be from his workshop. It is worth mentioning that Stiefel is rightly

cautious about making attributions based on fragments of information; those that he describes are based on painstaking research into documentary evidence and forensic study of the objects themselves by furniture experts including Alan Andersen, Alan Miller and Christopher Storb. The details of this analysis and its findings form the bulk of the later chapters in the book, divided into sections according to different types of furniture, from chests of drawers, tables and bedsteads to clock cases and desks, and many of the necessary but mundane items like close stools, cradles and coffins. For some, this is the real meat of the book and there is plenty of detailed analysis to satisfy hungry furniture historians.

In the central chapters Stiefel goes further than many furniture historians might have done, in piecing together evidence from the Account Book which reveals details of his home, his family, their food and drink, clothing and livestock, as well as of his workshop, tools, hardware and timber. Head's spelling shows his Suffolk origins,

with words such as 'duftails', gimblits', 'scutchens' and 'inges', bringing us close to hearing him speak. He appears a resourceful character and shrewd businessman, dealing in second-hand furniture and clocks, buying in chairs and selling them on to his customers, dealing in timber and cloth, even gradually acquiring land and property, so that by his death he owned seven houses. There is a great deal of information here about daily life and work in Colonial America.

It is to Stiefel's credit that he has extracted so much from an account book. This is the best sort of history, strongly based on evidence but described in such a way that human endeavour and achievement shine through. It is social history, providing the colour and texture of the world in which John Head's furniture had its place. And for furniture historians the Account Book is treasure of the rarest sort, its very survival is to be celebrated and Stiefel has more than done it justice.

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