

## John Erhart Rose 1767–1860

The *Knoxville Times* newspaper announced the new cabinetmaker as having ‘served a regular apprenticeship in the city of Philadelphia’ and that his work was ‘first rate & fashionable’. It was July 29, 1825 and Philadelphia was a center of everything fashionable, so the advertisement was strategically worded to tell potential customers that this cabinetmaker came with the very best credentials, including skills in ‘Burnishing, Carving, and Cabinet Work of every description’. The cabinetmaker’s name was John Erhart Rose, who completed his seven-year apprenticeship and practiced the cabinetmaking trade for the next seventy years before his death at age ninety-three in Abingdon, Virginia. His story is not only colorful but fairly typical of the artisan community on Virginia’s western frontier.

Unlike Virginia’s Tidewater colony, which was settled a century earlier alongside the Atlantic coast, its western territory was a vast frontier until the late eighteenth century. It was not until after the Revolutionary War that settlement got underway there in earnest. The western settlers were comprised of two primary groups, Germans from the Palatinate-Rhineland and British settlers from northern England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. They traveled by pack horse and wagon down the great Valley of Virginia, nestled behind the Blue Ridge Mountains. Far from Tidewater’s ports where English goods arrived by the boatload, the Valley developed in small towns with a market for most everything, which meant a ready and thriving artisan culture.

One of them was John Rose, who was of German descent and a third-generation American artisan. His grandfather, Johann Erhard Rose, had emigrated to the Philadelphia area as a weaver. John’s father, Daniel Rose, was a well-known clockmaker in Reading, Pennsylvania (where John was born in 1767), and John’s apprenticeship could have been intended to teach him how to case clocks for his father. Whether he did or not is largely unknown, since most of the existing records on



Corner cupboard, c. 1810, cherry with light wood inlay, H 91 in (231 cm), W 50¾ in (129 cm). *Private collection.*  
*Photo James H. Price*

John Rose document him leaving Reading and assuming a somewhat nomadic life traveling up and down the Valley. His story is centered in Abingdon, where he was first recorded in its 1810 census and where he married and started a family, including three sons who became cabinetmakers themselves. Despite the lack of signature,



Secretary, mahogany and mahogany veneer with rosewood cross banding, inscribed, 'made by John Erhart Rose, East Tennessee, Knoxville, July 28th 1833', H 65 in (165 cm), W 45 in (114 cm), D 24 in (61 cm). *Tennessee State Museum, Nashville. Photo Bill LaFevor*



Tea Caddy, mahogany with inlaid escutcheon of light wood, inscribed, 'Made by John E. Rose, Reading, Bercks County, Penn. 1848'. H 8¾ in (22 cm), W 10½ in (27 cm), D 6¾ in (17 cm). *William King Museum of Art, Abingdon. Photo James H. Price*



three pieces that can be attributed to Rose during this early Abingdon period are a corner cupboard with scalloped shelves, dentil molding and architectural pilasters; a dining table with delicate reeded legs; and a clock case made for his neighbor and clockmaker, Valentine Baugh. All are made with local cherry and reflect a Virginia taste for refined simplicity. It could have been this preference for restraint that prompted Rose to push 130 miles further west around 1820 and settle his family for a few years in Knoxville, Tennessee. Here, he discarded the Virginia preference and showed off his Philadelphia skills in carving, burnishing and veneers, using mahogany woods imported for an appreciative Knoxville market.

Perhaps his masterpiece is an elaborate 1833 secretary, an enthusiastic celebration of his Philadelphia training as well as his signature carvings of scrolled acanthus leaves, footed urns and cross-hatched fruit baskets with outward turned griffin heads. The primary woods are mahogany with mahogany veneers and rosewood cross-banding while secondary woods are white pine and tulip poplar. The secretary also illustrates a bit of whimsy and ego. Each of the document boxes flanking the central door are made to look like books and stamped in gold gilt, one reading 'John E. Rose's works'. Rose signed and dated the secretary as he did many pieces from this period, enabling us today to form a picture of a man who galloped back and forth between the Virginia/Tennessee frontier and his original home territory at the top of the Valley. One of several pieces noted with a Pennsylvania location and signed 'Made by John E. Rose, Bercks County, Penn. 1848', is a mahogany tea caddy with intact foil lining and Rose's later lion's paw feet. Why he maintained this seemingly dual life between Pennsylvania and Abingdon is a tantalizing unknown. His family remained in Abingdon from c.1830, which is where John Rose died at age ninety-three after a brief bout with pneumonia.

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