

## Cupola House Desk and Bookcase

By

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The Cupola House Association is pleased to have acquired an important example of early North Carolina cabinetry. Presently on display in Dr. Dickinson's medical office, the desk and bookcase represents the type of furniture Dr. Dickinson would have used in this room (Fig. 1, Cupola House desk and bookcase). Along with newly acquired examples of period medical equipment, medicines, storage containers, and even live leeches, this desk and bookcase enhances the visitors' ability to experience this office as late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Edenton residents would have viewed it.



Figure 1

The Cupola House's newly acquired desk and bookcase is documented in the research files of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) (See MESDA File S-5448). They noted the piece was of North Carolina origin and was composed of walnut primary wood and yellow pine secondary wood. It had descended from "Moriah Cozart of Moriah, in Person County, North Carolina". MESDA documented her marriage to Henry Curtis Sweaney and the piece's descent to their son, John Lockhart Sweaney. It then was passed to his son, Hunter Sweaney, and from Hunter to the owner at the time of MESDA's examination.

The desk and bookcase has a coved base molding as well as fluted quarter columns. These columns have a vernacular feel with matching elements on the top and bottom of each column, which is a more rural adaptation of formal architectural models. Its case drawers are supported by almost full-depth, full-thickness dustboards. There are no glue blocks supporting the bottom boards of the case drawers. The desk interior consists of a central drawer beneath a central prospect door between fluted document drawers, which are flanked by drawers and pigeonholes (Fig. 2, Desk interior of Fig. 1). The desk's interior drawer bottoms are dadoed into the drawer fronts and sides, and the drawer bottoms extend to serve as drawer stops. Again, no glue blocks are present.



Figure 2



Boldly shaped brackets over pigeonholes in the desk section are repeated in the bookcase, which has flat paneled doors and rests in a coved base molding. The cornice consists of a cove molding surmounted by a dental course. The most striking feature of the desk and bookcase is the pitch pediment that rises from the cornice. Pediments found on area pieces of this period usually contain a curved section that transitions inwardly to the cornice. The pediment on this piece consists of a rectangular panel containing cove molding and a dental course rising from each end of the cornice. This is unusual and distinctive. At some point in its history, the pediment was removed, most likely when the desk and bookcase was placed into a modern home with low ceilings. It has been reattached to the cornice using modern wire nails. The impressions of wrought, rose-head nails that originally secured the pediment to the cornice remain (Fig. 3, Wrought nail impressions on Fig. 1). A probe inserted into the holes made by the shafts of the wrought nails demonstrates that the holes made by the shafts extend through the pediment some distance into the cornice, offering proof that the pediment is original to the desk and bookcase.



Figure 3

Features such as the use of wrought, rose-head nails, quarter-round molding around case drawer edges that do not extend over the drawer surrounds, and decorative case elements would appear to

date this desk and bookcase to the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century or very early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, a close examination of the piece reveals the date 1809, once as “June, 1809”, written in pencil in several locations. Two of the locations would have been difficult, if not impossible, to reach after the case was assembled (Fig. 4, Date inside interior drawer opening of Fig. 1) (Fig. 5, Date inside interior drawer opening of Fig. 1). Assembly marks



Figure 4



Figure 5

used to aid the cabinetmaker, including numbers on the outside corners of the interior drawers, were also written in pencil. Therefore, in all likelihood, 1809 represents the date the piece was constructed. The name “James”, followed by other marks, was found written in chalk on the bottom surface of an interior drawer during MESDA’s examination of the desk and bookcase. The marks following this name appear to be several letters written on top of each other, likely creating a cipher (Fig. 6, Name on bottom of drawer of Fig. 1). A recent reexamination revealed the same name



“James”, again followed by other marks, this time in pencil, written vertically on a desk backboard (Fig. 7, Name on backboard of Fig. 1).



Figure 6



Figure 7

A second, clearly legible name, “Bobby Newcomb”, was also discovered written in pencil on top of the desk (Fig. 8, Name on top of desk portion of Fig. 1).



Figure 8

The names and dates inscribed on this desk and bookcase warrant their own discussion, as they present as many questions as answers. The clear, neatly written "James" in chalk appears to be followed by a cypher consisting of two letters, a script "Y" and a script "J" surmounted by a flourish

(See Fig. 6). In studying the flow of the chalk lines in this cypher, it appears the “J” with its flourish was placed on the drawer bottom first. The “Y” appears to have been placed over top of the “J”/flourish combination. This cypher is followed by indistinguishable marks.

If it were only the single name “James”, with no cypher following it, one could be led to the possibility that this desk and bookcase was made by a very talented slave. However, the second “James” signature in pencil with only flourishes following it (See Fig. 7) is by an entirely different hand. Likely, the “James” in chalk with its cypher was signed by the cabinetmaker, possibly signifying his last name, “James”, and it is prominently displayed on an interior drawer bottom, readily available for view. The “James” in pencil on the backboard may be by an apprentice in the shop signifying his work for the shop master. It should be noted that construction marks found on this desk and bookcase are also in pencil, like the “James” in pencil, and are not readily available to public view. These marks include assembly numbers on the exterior of interior drawers, assembly marks on the interior of desk backboards, “X” marks on the desk interior partitions, and “X” marks on the center of the case drawer backs. A similar situation was encountered at Hope Plantation where an apprentice signed for master builder, William Seay, inverted on the back of a stair riser, again out of public view (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, pp. 180-181 and Fig. 270).

The two inscribed dates (See Figs. 4 and 5) appear to be by the same hand but not by either of the hands of the “James” signatures. A third workman appears to have written these dates.

The “Bobby Newcomb” signature, by yet another hand, is likely an owner's name. This signature appears to be more mid-century in style. If so, Newcomb was likely a subsequent owner of this desk and bookcase.

The curvilinear brackets of the desk interior and the bookcase interior are of an unusual pattern. They resemble, and were probably derived from, arched raised panels, also called compass-arch and tombstone panels, found on early to mid 18<sup>th</sup> century furniture and architectural paneling. Based on surviving examples, this pattern did not experience widespread use in North Carolina or Virginia. It was, however, favored by Rowan County cabinetmaker, James Gheen, and neighboring cabinetmakers influenced by Gheen (See MESDA Files S-2184, S-2584, and D-32516). Gheen



used a distinctive foot support system consisting of a single block on each end of the case the full height of the case feet, shaped in the middle so as not to be seen between the feet from side view. Evidence of this foot support system is not present on the Cupola House desk and bookcase, nor are other Gheen and Rowan County decorative features.

The Cupola House desk and bookcase exhibits features found on furniture of the same period constructed in North Carolina's Roanoke River Basin. They include assembly numbers on the exterior of drawer sides and backs (Fig. 9, Interior drawer assembly numbers on Fig. 1) (See *WH Cabinetmaker, A Southern Mystery Solved*, Figs. 80 and 92), similar quarter column capitols and bases (Fig. 10, Quarter column on Fig. 1) (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Figs. 102 and 314), fairly wide bevels on drawer bottom edges (Fig. 11, Drawer bottom of Fig. 1) (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Fig. 236), and close to full depth, full thickness dust-boards. Coved base



Figure 9





Figure 10



Figure 11

molding, however, is more often found on Norfolk work of the period. Norfolk cabinetry was a major influence throughout southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina. Stylistically, considering its 1809 date, the Cupola House desk and bookcase would have been 20 years out of style in urban centers such as Norfolk. Rural, interior sites, however, often clung to earlier styles well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Considering all these factors as well as its known history, the desk and bookcase may have been constructed in north-central North Carolina, an area heavily influenced by North Carolina's Roanoke River Basin, or perhaps just over the state line in south-central Virginia. Further research will undoubtedly clarify this question, especially if information can be found concerning the names found on the piece. Stay tuned for further updates.

References:

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Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts Research Files.