

Blanket Chests from William Seay's Cabinet Shop

By

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Note to Reader: Blanket chest is a generic, 20th-century term for a simple, multi-purpose storage chest. Undoubtedly, blankets would have been stored in some, but early documents also reference chests of books, clothes, rags, tools, pots, etc. That said, most people understand what is meant by the term, blanket chest, and that is the term used in this article.

The following article examines a number of blanket chests that can now be attributed to the cabinet shop of Bertie county house joiner and cabinetmaker, William Seay. Research over the past several years has shed light on what was essentially a woodworking industrial complex that developed in the last decades of the 18th century and the first decade of the 19th century around the small Roanoke River port now known as Roxobel. This area of western Bertie County was first heavily settled in the 1740s by families and individuals immigrating from the Albemarle region of northeastern North Carolina, and southeastern and south-central Virginia. The region's first generation of settlers had to concentrate their efforts on clearing cropland out of the wilderness. By the 1770s, wealth and land had been concentrated in the hands of the children of the initial settlers. These individuals became the founding members of an elite plantation society

occupying the rich bottomlands along both sides of the Roanoke River. The families intermarried and consolidated wealth, and were then able to invest in substantial houses that they felt better reflected their growing affluence and status. Their house joiner of choice was William Seay.

As William Seay took the lead in constructing these elaborate homes along both sides of the Roanoke River, workmen were drawn to the Roxobel area by the promise of substantial employment opportunities. At the epicenter of this growing woodworking community was Mr. Seay's cabinet shop (Fig. 1, Seay cabinet shop).



Figure 1

Seay's cabinet shop was constructed circa 1790 on a section of his 1000-acre plantation that began with an inheritance from his father, Dr. James Seay. Dr. Seay was a native of King William County, Virginia, and arrived in Bertie in the late 1740s as a part of the first large wave of immigrants. A small tract included in the section of Dr. Seay's plantation inherited by his son William had been known since the 1750s as "Saw Scaffold", indicating its use as a woodworking area. William Seay chose

this site to locate his cabinet shop. The Saw Scaffold tract formed a section of William's plantation that projected to the west between the holdings of his brothers. This location centered his shop and made it easily accessible to his woodworking brothers, Isaac and John Seay. A Bertie County soil survey map published by the United States Department of Agriculture in 1918, well before our current highway system was installed, shows the roads and paths in and around William Seay's plantation much as they probably existed in Seay's time. Roads led from the cabinet shop northwest to the property of John Seay and northeast to what is believed to be the site of William Seay's house. This second road continued past William's house, turned north and then northwest, then passed through the property of Isaac Seay and past the probable location of his house. The road continued to join the main road to the Roxobel crossroads. There it crossed the road that still leads to Norfleet's Landing on the Roanoke River, giving William Seay the means to ship his cabinet ware to his customers and finished interior woodwork to building sites up and down the River.

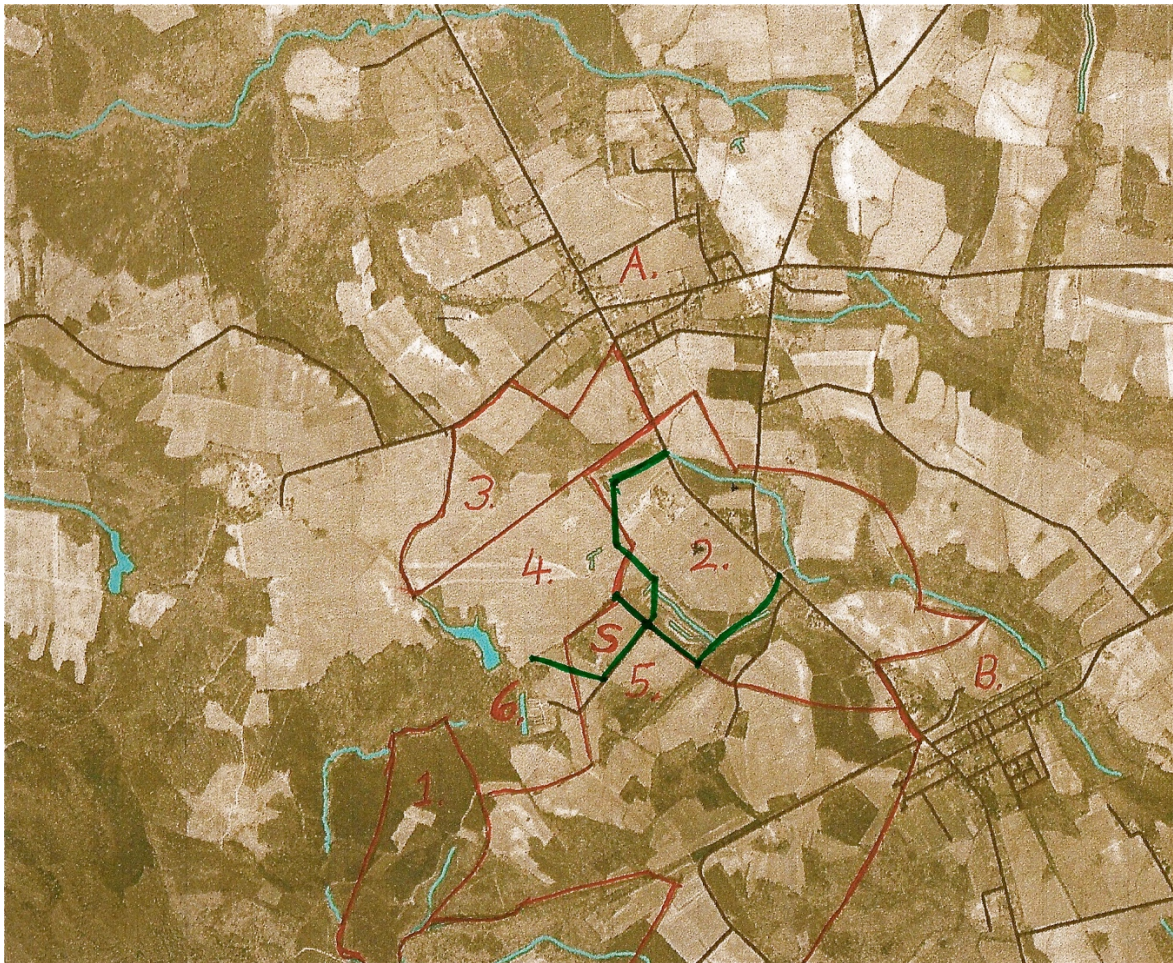


Figure 2



Figure 3

Figure 2 is a current map of the area of Bertie County between Roxobel and Kelford showing the known land boundaries of William Seay and his siblings during the period in question. Figure 3 is the 1918 soil survey map of the same area, with small squares representing buildings as they stood at that time. (A) denotes Roxobel on both maps and (B) Kelford. Number 5 on Figure 2, including the portion marked (S) for Saw Scaffold, illustrates the boundaries of William Seay's plantation. On Figure 3, (S) represents the location of the cabinet shop, and the square above (5) the most likely location of William Seay's house. Other numbers serve the

same purpose for the properties of John Seay (6), Isaac Seay (4), and the Sharrock family (3). Roads connecting the brothers' properties to the shop location are highlighted in green on Figure 3, and recreated in green on Figure 2 for clarity.

About the same time that William Seay built his cabinet shop, Norfolk trained cabinetmaker, Thomas Sharrock, Sr., and a number of his sons, undoubtedly trained by their father in the trade, were drawn to the Roxobel crossroads from neighboring Northampton County by Seay's business success. They purchased land just northwest of where the Seay road joined the main road to Roxobel and constructed their own cabinet shop. It was almost identical to Seay's shop, was located less than a mile from Seay's shop, and survived until the early 1970s (Fig. 4, Sharrock cabinet shop) (Fig. 5, Detail of Fig. 4).



Figure 4



Figure 5

A third major cabinet shop stood just five miles north of Seay's shop in southern Northampton County. Thomas White moved from Perquimans County to this site in 1766 after marrying the daughter of wealthy Northampton County planter, John Duke. A native of Isle of Wight County, Virginia, strong Quaker ties let White's father to purchase land in Perquimans County, where Thomas settled in 1756. Those same Quaker ties explain the compelling evidence of White's training in Newport, Rhode Island, probably in the shop of John Goddard. White's Newport training is evident in the decorative and construction details of several desks attributed to him during his years in Perquimans County. He maintained a cabinet shop at his residence on his father-in-law's property until his death in 1788. Two extravagant cellarets are attributed to White during his Northampton County years (See *Cellarets and Sugar Chests* at www.ehcnc.org, Figs. 29-35). White's Newport-based cabinetry appears to have been a major stylistic and decorative influence on the cabinetwork of William Seay, his neighbor to the south, including the rounded drops in combination with a coved element used on Seay feet (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Figs. 213 and 319), articulated arches on Seay cabinet doors (See Bivins, *Furniture of Coastal NC*, Fig. 5-126c and *WH Cabinetmaker*, Fig. 73), and articulated patera-like carved panels found on Seay desks and cupboards (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Figs. 31 and 323). The shops of these three artisans, Thomas White, Thomas Sharrock, and William Seay, located within five miles of each other, form the nucleus of

what came to be called the Roanoke River Basin School of Cabinetmaking.

The first of five blanket chests to be examined has a number of construction characteristics that point to its construction by William Seay. With at least two cabinet shops and a number of workmen in close proximity to the Seay shop, it should be expected that the habits and traits of one shop would influence other nearby shops, and vice versa. Then as today, craftsmen follow the available jobs, so workmen from one shop might well migrate to the neighboring shops as need dictated. William Seay seems to have been the exception to this practice. The core group of case pieces known to have been made by Seay are remarkable consistent in their construction methodology. These pieces include the WH group, the Masonic decorated corner cupboards, two known chests of drawers, and a number of desks, blanket chests, and corner cupboards. While the hands of other individuals are evident on several of the pieces, and there were certainly a number of workmen going in and out of his cabinet shop, whether constructing case furniture or interior woodwork of the houses he built, Seay seems to have taken a personal interest in the furniture he built. He consistently employed house joining and carpentry techniques in his cabinet wares. At the same time, other shop workmen, including Micajah Wilkes, Seay's brother-in-law, were also constructing furniture in Seay's shop. These pieces display the influence of the shop master, William

Seay, as well as the more conventional cabinetry practices of the nearby cabinet shop of Thomas Sharrock, Sr., and his sons.



Figure 6

The Seay blanket chest descended in the Cooper family of Bertie County (Fig. 6, Cooper blanket chest). It is constructed of yellow pine and retains elements of its original Prussian blue paint. Battens are morticed and through-tenoned to each end of the case top to prevent warping (Fig. 7, Through tenoned batten of Fig. 6). This technique is seen on a number of Seay pieces, including a chest of drawers and several blanket chests (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Fig. 196).



Figure 7



Figure 8

Two drawers are placed under its case storage compartment. The case escutcheon and drawer pulls are original (Fig. 8, Escutcheon of Fig. 6).



Figure 9



Figure 10

Drawer dovetails are consistent with those found on the drawers of other Seay pieces (Fig. 9, Drawer dovetails of Fig. 6) (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Fig. 201). Case dovetails are set on the sides of the case rather than along the front (Fig. 10, Case dovetails of Fig. 6). They are narrower than those usually found in like positions, but they do match the more elongated dovetails Seay used on some of his interior desk drawers with thicker drawer fronts (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Figs. 112 and 297).



Figure 11



Figure 12

A single drawer is placed under the blanket chest's till (Fig. 11, Till of Fig. 6). The inverted V construction mark consistently found on Seay's work is present on the Cooper blanket chest (See Fig. 7) (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Fig. 304). One appears on the exterior back of a case drawer, and a second appears on the interior back of the till drawer. The drawers also display the use of assembly numbers on their interior corners (Fig. 12, Inverted V drawer construction mark and assembly number on Fig. 6). This numbering system occurs on a series of blanket chests made by Seay and is a variation of the numbering technique Seay employed to construct the

case drawers of his chest of drawers and desks (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Figs. 198 and 80). There the numbers appear on the case drawer backs.



Figure 13



Figure 14

The in-turned feet of the Cooper blanket chest are the same Norfolk inspired feet found on a number of Sharrock case pieces and are an example of the stylistic cross-pollination that so often occurred between the Seay and Sharrock shops. They are joined by a rabbeted joint secured by trunnels or small wrought nails (Fig. 13, Foot with rabbeted joint on Fig. 6). This construction method is also found on a blanket chest constructed by a member of the Sharrock family (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Fig. 203). Each foot is supported by a shaped vertical block flanked by horizontal shaped and rounded blocks (Fig. 14, Foot blocking on Fig. 6). Similarly shaped horizontal blocks are found on a desk built by Seay for

wealthy Halifax County planter Whitmell Hill as part of the WH commission (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Fig. 107). There the support blocks were placed under a triangular block, while here they are secured to the blanket chest's case bottom. The rear feet of the Cooper blanket chest are supported by coved rear foot supports in typical Seay fashion.

The Cooper blanket chest sat in an early house on King Street in Windsor, North Carolina, in the late 1800s. While it is possible it descended in the Cooper family, who lived southeast of Windsor on the Cooper Hill Road, two Cooper ancestors had close ties to William Seay and represent the most likely path of descent for the blanket chest to owner Sheriff John Wheeler Cooper of Windsor, born in 1873. The first possibility is Cooper's great grandfather, John Wheeler.¹ Wheeler was enticed to move to Bertie County by prominent planter and merchant, Zedekiah Stone, when Stone's son, David Stone, entered politics, eventually becoming Governor of North Carolina. Seay constructed Hope Plantation for David Stone in 1803 on land Stone inherited from his father (Fig. 15, Hope Plantation, built by William Seay). Seay's name, most likely written and misspelled, "W Seey", by a Seay apprentice to signify his work product, appears inverted on the back of a stair riser in the service stairs at Hope (Fig. 16, "W Seey", sp., written inverted on back of stair riser of Fig. 15. The enhancement is based on our personal observations of the inverted writing on the back of the stair riser at Hope Plantation).



Figure 15



Figure 16

The second likely possibility of descent for the Cooper blanket chest is from Cooper's great-great-grandfather, James Bond of Bertie County.² William Seay constructed a house for Bond's son, John Bond, very near and at about the same time as Hope Plantation (Fig. 17, Bond House, built by William Seay).



Figure 17

The second blanket chest to be considered in this article is basically a hybrid Seay-Sharrock example, with construction traits found in both shops (Fig. 18, Seay shop blanket chest). It was purchased at a local estate sale in Roxobel around 1968. This example is also constructed of yellow pine and retains most of its original Prussian blue surface. Like the first example, its case is joined with dovetails set on the sides of the case, rather than along its front. Its top is secured with triple, through-tenoned battens, in typical Seay fashion (Fig. 19, Triple through-tenoned batten of Fig. 18).



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20

An unusually delicate cove molding is attached under the battens. The top is attached to the case with butt table hinges, the same type hinges used by Micajah Wilkes, Seay's brother-in-law, to attach the tops to the cases of a series of cellarets he constructed in Seay's cabinet shop (Fig. 20, Back of Fig. 18, showing table hinges) (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Fig. 373).

In-turned feet used by the Sharocks, as well as in Seay's shop, support the case (Fig. 21, Foot of Fig. 18). They are joined with a rabbeted joint secured with trunnels or small wrought nails and are backed by shaped vertical corner blocks that remain square where they join the case bottom (Fig. 22, Foot blocking of Fig. 18). These blocks are flanked by horizontal



Figure 21

blocks that abut the square portions of the vertical blocks and are shaped to mimic the contour of the feet. The bottom of the case is tooth planed in each corner to create more surface area to strengthen the glued attachment of the feet and blocks to the case bottom. The rear feet are backed by angled rear foot supports (See Fig. 20). The feet and their supports are textbook Sharrock construction and are a good example of the influence the Sharrock family of cabinetmakers had on workmen in Seay's shop, though apparently not on Seay himself.



Figure 22



Figure 23

Two drawers are set below the till, with a partition between. When the drawers are removed, the partition can be pulled out to reveal two hidden compartments set behind the two till drawers for the storage of valuables (Fig. 23, Till, with secret storage compartments exposed, of Fig. 18). This is a variation on the series of Seay shop blanket chests with movable till walls that slide up to reveal hidden drawers (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Fig. 197). The use of a partition to access a secret storage area on this blanket chest is very similar to that found on a desk that relates to what has come to be called the Crow Group of desks and chests found in Halifax and Mecklenburg Counties in Virginia, located up the Roanoke River from

Roxobel and the Seay cabinet shop.³ On this desk, a hidden drawer with a deep vertical partition set at each end is found behind a long drawer located under the desk prospect. It is accessed the same way as on the blanket chest; the long drawer under the prospect is removed and the partitions are pulled out to reveal the hidden valuables compartment. Additional similarities between Crow Group construction and the construction of Seay case pieces is discussed in *WH Cabinetmaker, A Southern Mystery Solved*.⁴



Figure 24

Three signatures that appear under the original till lid should be considered in the examination of this blanket chest (Fig. 24, Signatures under till lid of

Fig. 18). Although approximately two inches of the lid has been lost, the signatures appear to have been centered on the board after it was cut to size to fit the till of this blanket chest. To the proper right of the board are the MW initials of Micajah Wilkes, William Seay's brother-in-law who undoubtedly shared his cabinet shop. Either his initials or his initials in the form of a cypher appear on a number of pieces attributed to Wilkes. The name on the proper left end of the till lid is Futrell. While few if any Futrells were native to Bertie County during this period, a number of family members lived in neighboring Northampton County. The 1790 Northampton County census lists twenty-two separate Futrell households, including some who lived within just a few miles of the Seay shop.⁵ So this signature probably represents a heretofore unknown journeyman working in Seay's shop.



Figure 25

Only two letters remain of the middle signature, “ay”, the last two letters of the word Seay (Fig. 25, close-up of signature on Fig. 18). Considering the lost section of the till and the placement of these two letters, this word must have been a short name, perhaps four or five letters, again consistent with Seay. A comparison of the formation of these two letters and the signature of William Seay shows that they are not in Seay’s hand. The “a” on the blanket chest begins with a forward loop and the tail of the “y” carries back under the word. William Seay formed a conventional “a” and his “y” invariably curves back on itself, sometimes crossing. However, the signature of William Seay, Jr., who died in 1803, does contain letters that

exactly match the “a” and the “y” found on this blanket chest (Fig. 26, Signature of William Seay, Jr.).

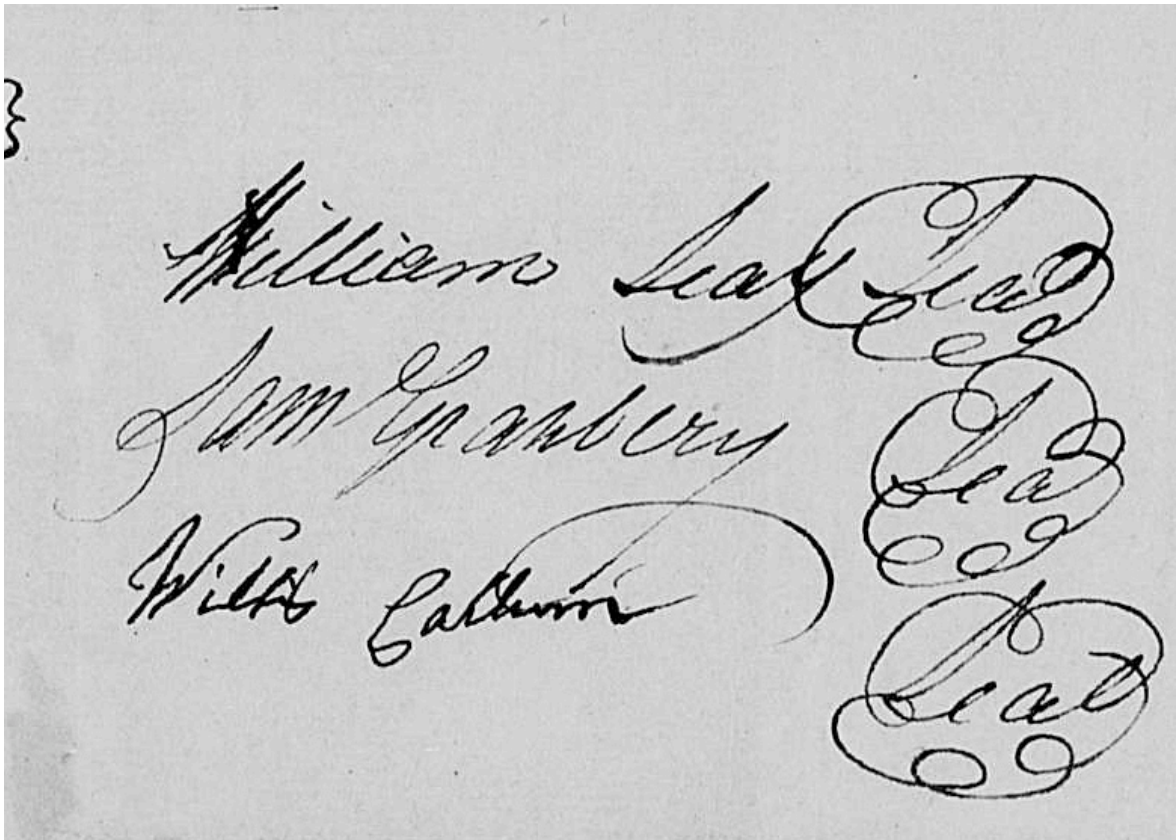


Figure 26

The signature is preserved on a document noting his appointment as guardian of Peggy Andrews, the daughter of neighbor Stephen Andrews. The “a” in William in the signature of William Seay, Jr., also begins with a forward loop, like the “a” on the till lid. Each of the upper elements of the “y” in Seay in his signature end in a sharp point, matching the “y” on the blanket chest. The tail of the “y” in his signature turns back under the

word, again like the blanket chest. Considering the physical characteristics of the blanket chest linking it to Seay's cabinetry, the MW initials found under the till lid, and the fact that the "a" and the "y" found under the till lid of the blanket chest are formed in the same manner as those letters in the signature of William Seay, Jr., even though one is written on paper and one is written across the grain of a yellow pine board, the evidence points to this being the last two letters of Seay written in the hand of William Seay, Jr. All these factors, taken together, point to William Seay's cabinet shop as the place of origin of this blanket chest.



Figure 27

A blanket chest virtually identical to the previous example was recently purchased from the estate of Northampton County native, Bill Burgwyn, noted District Attorney, historian, and antiques dealer (Fig. 27, Seay shop

blanket chest). This yellow pine chest retains traces of its original Prussian blue paint.



Figure 28

This piece is also joined by dovetails set to the side of the case, although they appear to be by a different hand from the previous chest (Fig. 28, Case dovetails of Fig. 27). Its feet also match the earlier chest and are again joined with rabbeted joints secured by trunnels (Fig. 29, Foot of Fig. 27). The feet are supported by shaped vertical blocks, square in section where they meet the case bottom (Fig. 30, Foot blocks of Fig. 27). Shaped horizontal blocks mimicking the contour of the feet again flank the vertical

blocks. The rear foot supports are angled in Sharrock fashion, and the corners of the case bottom are tooth planed for a more secure attachment of the glue joints attaching the feet and blocks to the case bottom.



Figure 29



Figure 30



Figure 31

The top of the blanket chest contains the same triple through-tenoned batten ends as seen on the Cooper blanket chest (See Fig. 28). It also displays basically the same molding under the outside edges of the top as is found on the previous blanket chest (Fig. 31, Molding under top of Fig. 27). The top is joined to the case with the same table butt hinges seen on the previous example that were so favored by Micajah Wilkes in like positions on his cellarets (Fig. 32, Back of Fig. 27, showing table hinges).



Figure 32

The fully intact till lid remains with this blanket chest and contains a molded edge. Two drawers, separated by a vertical partition, are again found under the till (Fig. 33, Till of Fig. 27). The drawer bottoms are set in rabbets run under the front, sides, and back of each drawer, and are attached with trunnels. Like the last blanket chest, when they are removed

and the vertical partition is pulled out, secret compartments are revealed (Fig. 34, Hidden storage compartments of Fig. 27). Unfortunately, no signatures were found under this blanket chest's till lid.



Figure 33



Figure 34



Figure 35

Except for lacking drawers and a secret storage compartment under its till, the fourth blanket chest is virtually identical to the previous two examples (Fig. 35, Seay shop blanket chest). Here, the case and the feet are joined with dovetails, all set to the side of the case (Fig. 36, Case dovetails of Fig. 35). The same triple through-tenoned battens were used to prevent warping of the case top. A delicate molding, very similar to the previous two blanket chests, is found under the battens (Fig. 37, Triple through-tenoned batten and molding of Fig. 35). The feet, here dovetailed rather

than rabbeted, and the foot blocking also match the earlier examples, including shaped vertical blocks left square in section where they meet the case bottom, flanked by shaped horizontal blocks, and angled rear foot supports (Fig. 38, Foot of Fig. 35) (Fig. 39, Foot blocking of Fig. 35). In fact, without compelling evidence that the first of these three blanket chests was signed by two individuals who worked in the Seay cabinet shop, this blanket chest would be taken to be a Sharrock product.



Figure 36



Figure 37



Figure 38



Figure 39

The last blanket chest to be discussed is one of the most important Roanoke River Basin finds of the last several years, and there is no reasonable doubt that it was constructed in Seay's cabinet shop. The chest was built by Micajah Wilkes, Seay's brother-in-law (Fig. 40, Wilkes blanket chest). Not only does it bear his initials on its front like the cellaret illustrated on the back cover of *WH Cabinetmaker*, but the initials on this blanket chest are actually written in Wilkes own hand (Fig. 41, MW initials on Fig. 40). Wilkes' signature survives in the Bertie County estate file of David Granberry (Fig. 42, Signature of Micajah Wilkes). Except for the flourish at the end of the "W" in Wilkes in the document turning upward rather than downward as it appears on the blanket chest,

the lettering is an exact match, including small reverse loops at the points of both letters as well as the beginning of the “W” being formed like a capitol “T”. Wilkes also ended his letters on the blanket chest with floral designs that match those used to form the letters “WH” on a now detached pediment of a Seay corner cupboard made for patron, Whitmell Hill, illustrated in Figure 87 in *WH Cabinetmaker* (Fig. 43, Floral design in initials on Fig. 40).



Figure 40



Figure 41

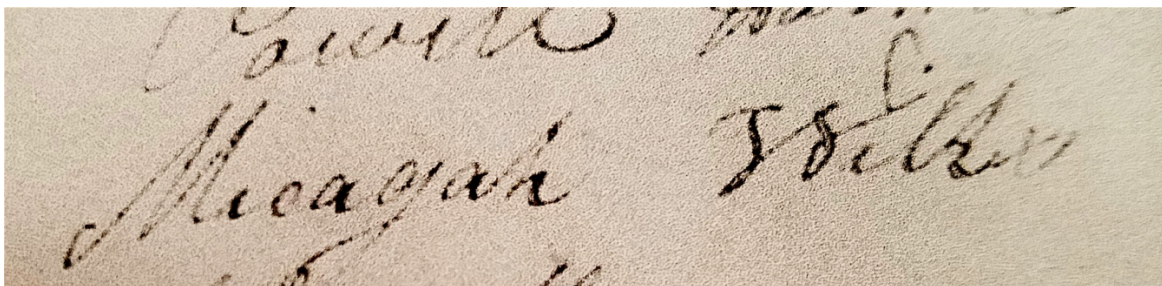


Figure 42



Figure 43

The Wilkes blanket chest retains its original ornamental graining. The feet are very similar to those found on the WH desk currently in the collection of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and include the rounded drop and coved element favored by Seay, located where each foot meets the base molding (Fig. 44, Foot of Fig. 40) (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Fig. 100). The foot blocking is distinctive and shows the direct influence of his brother-in-law, William Seay. The feet are supported by shaped vertical blocks, square in section where they meet the case bottom. The blocks were then gouged out to allow a wrought nail to be driven through the squared section into the case bottom, to secure the foot. The coved rear foot supports match those found on the Cooper chest and are a further example of Seay's influence (Fig. 45, Foot blocking and rear foot support of Fig. 40) (See *WH Cabinetmaker*, Fig. 308).



Figure 44



Figure 45

Each end of the top is supported by a heavy, shaped batten. A heavy quarter-round molding was run around the top's front and sides (Fig. 46, Top of Fig. 40). These characteristics, in addition to the use of cotter pin hinges, probably indicate that this chest was constructed early in Wilkes' career.



Figure 46

A single drawer was placed under the blanket chest's till (Fig. 47, Till of Fig. 40). The drawer's construction matches that of the hidden drawers found on the Seay blanket chests illustrated in Figures 198 and 201 in *WH Cabinetmaker*, including assembly numbers placed on the interior corners of the drawer (Fig. 48, Till drawer of Fig. 40). Wilkes used the identical numbering system to assemble the case of this blanket chest.



Figure 47



Figure 48

The Roanoke River Basin School of Cabinetmaking was not composed of separate pockets of craftsmen who worked in isolation, only creating furniture that reflected their individual background and training. It was a vibrant interaction of a series of cabinet shops of diverse backgrounds and influences that at times worked separately, and at times interacted, to serve the needs of an affluent client base of wealthy planter families along both sides of the Roanoke River as it flowed through Bertie, Northampton, and Halifax Counties in northeastern North Carolina. Some members of this cabinetmaking community, centered around the small river port now known as Roxobel, were more inclined to maintain their individual skill sets throughout long periods of their careers. William Seay, Sr., was one

such craftsman, as well as George Sharrock, based on attributed pieces, including a signed five-foot chest of drawers and a signed press with bookcase. The early work of Thomas Sharrock, Sr., also displays a consistency of cabinetmaking technique based on his Norfolk training. Other craftsmen who served in these area cabinet shops displayed more inclination to assimilate the cabinetry practices to which they were exposed as they moved among the shops as available work dictated. The names of many of these craftsmen will never be known. However, their work is represented by surviving pieces of cabinetry that display traits from the several Roanoke River Basin shops. The five blanket chests discussed in this article give examples of both types of influences, and hopefully will lead to the identification and appreciation of more of these hybrid, or stylistically blended, examples of the cabinetry of North Carolina's Roanoke River Basin.

Endnotes

1. Sally's Family Place website, John W. Cooper.
2. Ibid.
3. Wallace B. Gusler, "Queen Anne Style Desks from the Virginia Piedmont", *The Magazine Antiques*, October, 1973, pp. 665-666.
4. Thomas R.J. Newbern and James R. Melchor, *WH Cabinetmaker, A Southern Mystery Solved*, Legacy Ink Publishing, 2009, pp. 15-18.

5. Northampton Census of 1790.

Figures 26 and 42 are courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

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