

That's Odd!

Masonic Influence on Southern Furniture

By P. E. Collie

The intent of this article is to characterize the influence of the symbols and culture of the Freemasons on furniture design and decoration in Southeast Virginia and Northeastern North Carolina.

Culture and decorative arts in all countries were, and still are, affected by influential people, new technologies, interesting discoveries, and major events. These “cultural disruptions”, obvious in the moment, fade into obscurity as time moves on. Evidence persists as decorative motifs.

The following examples illustrate cultural disruptions that have affected material culture.

1496 - present - The pineapple brought back by Columbus on his second New World voyage came to represent royalty and later hospitality as it became more widely available. Until the nineteenth century, pineapples were so expensive in the Old and New Worlds that they were more often rented for display than purchased as social decoration for an event by the less wealthy.

1660 - 1840s - The Grand Tour was an educational rite of passage. It was a tour of historic sites mostly by wealthy Englishmen, but some Europeans, women of means, and Americans also participated. The Grand Tour provided exposure to the cultural legacy of classical antiquity and the Renaissance. The tradition faded as interest in classical antiquity waned. Caution! Some artifacts now represented as period examples are actually tourist items created by enterprising locals, so Grand Tour travelers could return home with an “ancient” souvenir.

1709/1738/1748 ongoing - The excavations of Herculaneum, and later Pompeii, created worldwide interest in early Roman culture and its Greek-inspired architecture and decorative arts. These sites were often included on a Grand Tour. These discoveries influenced furniture and architectural designs for over a century, reaching the pinnacle of influence during the Hepplewhite/Sheraton Period, after which the design styles degraded into the later Empire Period.

1776 ongoing - The American Revolution created a uniquely American vocabulary of designs of eagles, stars, red and white stripes, and 13-part element designs representing the original 13 colonies. While these symbols represented the newly formed United States, merchants in other countries, including those in recently defeated Great Britain, quickly added the new American designs to objects intended for sale in the American market.

1783 - A painting of Marie Antoinette in a simple, airy-cotton gown created a worldwide sensation and an immediate and unprecedented demand in feminine cotton attire (Fig. 1, Marie Antoinette in a muslin dress).



Figure 1

Cotton had not previously been a major American export but the sudden demand created the need for a vastly larger labor supply to harvest cotton. The New England slavers seized on the opportunity to supply the labor needs in the Southern states, primarily South Carolina. The demand for ships needed to acquire and transport slaves created an economic boom in New England. The slave trade underpinned New

England's economic development until the demand for whale oil superseded it two decades later.

1799 - The death of George Washington popularized and spread the concept of mourning memorabilia (Fig. 2, Washington mourning pitcher). The majority of American mourning memorabilia was created after Washington's death.



Figure 2

1816 to present - The kaleidoscope fired the imagination and led to a proliferation of symmetrical designs and decorative applications in the

early nineteenth century. Designs on quilts and painted furniture display the influence of the kaleidoscope. Even today the term kaleidoscope describes events, methods of thinking, and even found its way into a Beatles song.

Pre-1066/1783/1860/1876/1913 - Like the kaleidoscope, the appearance of meteors and comets, particularly Halley's Comet, created artistic representations across a range of media (Fig. 3, The Bayeux Tapestry showing Halley's Comet). This included homebased artists making quilts, painting decorative designs on furniture and hardware, and depictions by ancient and renowned artists such as Frederic Church.



Figure 3

Antiquity to present - Images on currency, particularly coinage, has been influenced by, and has itself influenced, artistic expression. Changes in decorative elements often provide clues that narrow the dates of furniture or other objects employing designs on currency. After his death, Washington's profile began to appear on many items including currency. The asymmetrical eagle, (Fig. 4, Eagle on the reverse of 1806 half dollar) (Fig. 5, Eagle on the reverse of 1807 half dollar) and the use of 15 stars on American objects (Fig. 6, Tympanum of William Seay cupboard) are examples that can be important in dating undated items. On March 4, 1791, Vermont became the 14th state; June 1, 1792, Kentucky the 15th; June 1, 1796, Tennessee became the 16th state of the Union. By counting the stars on American flags flown by ships or buildings in paintings or when used as decorative elements on undated objects, the date of an item can be narrowed.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Freemasons are a society that employ secret rituals and symbols to initiate, promote, and identify members. A brief historical overview of the Freemasons based on the timeframe of this article is provided at the end of this article.

Masonic Symbols on Southern Furniture

The majority of academic efforts to interpret early Southern furniture with Masonic symbols have been devoted to Masonic chairs and “internal” decorative elements for use inside the Masonic lodges of Colonial America. The intent and use of these objects are obvious since they were part of the lodge’s material goods or rituals. The published examples of Masonic chairs are numerically greater for the South than other regions of America, and the most developed and elaborate examples are Southern. This implies that Masons had greater representation in the South, especially considering the low ratio of surviving Southern material culture compared to that of the north.

The less obvious objects that convey Masonic symbolism scattered among the general population are the focus in this article. It is based on Masonic symbols in favor over 200 years ago which may not be consistent with current Masonic practice and ritual.

Masonic Symbolism on North Carolina Furniture

The tympanums of William Seay's cupboards are virtual billboards of Masonic symbols, some so cryptic they elude modern interpretation or at least interpretations on which all agree. In addition to symbols, Masons hold certain numbers in reverence. All the known Seay pediments with Masonic symbols use five-petal, "floppy" stars instead of the even number stars found on most Seay pediments without Masonic symbols in the tympanum (See Fig. 6) (Fig. 7, William Seay cupboard and cupboard tympanum) (Fig. 8, Close-up of eagle and stars on William Seay cupboard).



Figure 7



Figure 8

There are two possible interpretations for the use of five-pointed stars on these Seay cupboards.

The five-pointed, "floppy" stars with no other Masonic symbols present in the tympanum may communicate that the owner had only attained the Masonic level of an apprentice. This seems unrealistically limiting as it implies the owner did not aspire to reach the higher levels within the Masonic order.

A more plausible interpretation offered by Thomas Newbern rests on personality. Some owners wanted all to know they were Freemasons, so tympanums were covered with Masonic symbolisms. Those with American patriotic symbolism in the tympanums may have been Revolutionary War patriots, or their descendants, and wanted all to know and remember their role. Other owners were less overt about their Masonic membership. Their religion may have played a role. They opted for the less obvious five-pointed star that would be recognized by a fellow Mason but would go unnoticed by the uninitiated. Figure 9 illustrates such an example from the collection of Historic Hope Plantation that displays a five-pointed star with no further Masonic imagery. Evidence shows that this press with bookcase, signed by William Seay, was first owned by Perry and Rachel Tyler and contains their initials in its tympanum (Fig. 10, Tympanum of Fig. 9). While Tyler's name has not been found in the fragmentary records of the local Masonic lodge, a Seay Masonic cupboard descended in the family of his brother's stepson, Willis Powell (See Fig. 8).



Figure 9



Figure 10

Why are certain numbers important to Masons? The following brief explanations for the meaning of numbers to Masons was garnered from books and the Internet and are thought to be accurate but may not be inclusive of all possible meanings.

Three represents the first degrees, Entered Apprentice, Fellow of Craft, and Master Mason. Note the similarity through which an apprentice to a cabinet shop would pass.

Five represents the human senses. The three most important in Masonic symbolism are seeing, hearing, and feeling, as all are necessary to practice a craft. Five also represents the noble orders of architecture, Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Composite, which also appear as part of furniture and architectural designs, such as represented by corner columns on furniture.

Nine is a number representing wholeness and completion as expressed in the Royal Arch, one of whose meanings is the Vault of Heaven (Fig. 11, The Royal Arch).

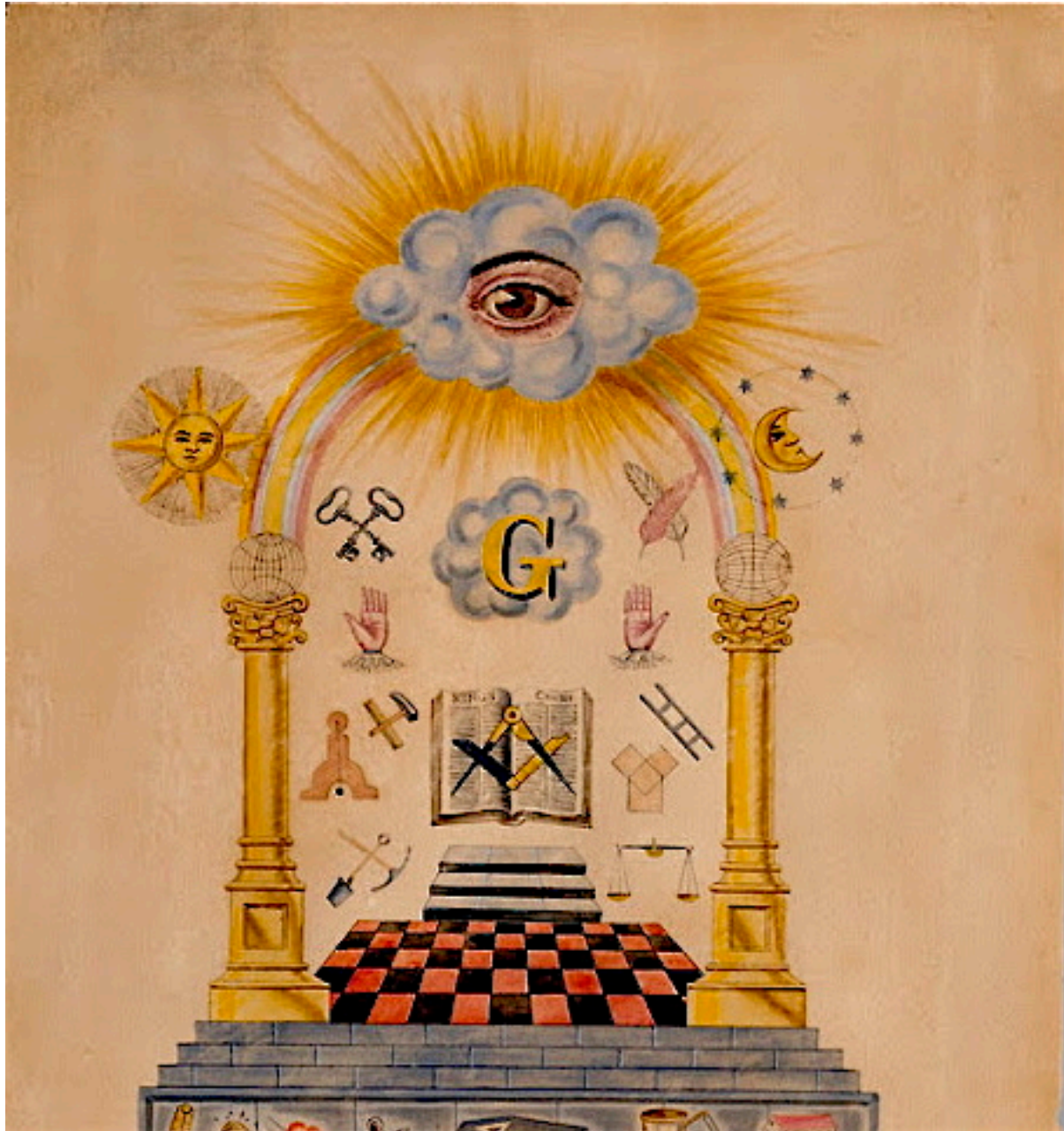


Figure 11

Historically, nine also represents the Nine Worthies, three each of which are Pagans, Jews, and Christians which underpins the concept of not putting any religion ahead of another. Nine also represents the Nine

Muses, inspirational goddesses in Greek mythology, with some of the Muses' emblems adopted as Masonic symbols such as the writing tablet of Calliope and the Globe of Urania. The concept of the Nine Muses received much attention during the Renaissance, and they appear separately or as a group on many stone carvings produced by early stone Masons.

Thirteen is problematic but comes up in literature associated with Masons. Throughout history, 13 has had significance to a range of groups and has been interpreted, maybe hijacked, into what might best be characterized as conspiracy theories.

Masonic Symbolism and Southern Furniture

A May 1989, *The Magazine Antiques* article authored by Wallace Gusler analyses a group of Colonial era tea tables attributed to southeastern Virginia. Among the tables are tripod tea tables with round, carved-edge tops. These are contemporarily referred to as “pie-crust” tea tables because the table-top edge resembles the fluted edge of a pie crust. Tea tables with pie-crust decorative rims are most frequently found as being made in Philadelphia where most were produced.

The design is actually based on silver salvers with elaborately fashioned perimeter decoration that were used as serving platters or business card holders in the eighteenth century (Fig. 12, Silver salver).



Figure 12

What could have been more fashionable than an elaborately shaped silver salver placed on a larger, identically carved pie-crust tea table? In the social context of a Colonial tea party, this would represent attention to detail that would be noticed, and likely emulated. The proverbial phrase “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery” owes its origins to early eighteenth century England.

A particularly interesting observation Wallace Gusler offers in *The Magazine Antiques* article is that a few pie-crust tea tables have carved tops that are divided into nine sections. This is unusual for four reasons. Round, carved-top tea table tops are usually divided into an even

number of sections. Eight-section designs occur with the greatest frequency. Most colonial-era geometric designs were drawn with the aid of a compass and were typically laid out with an even number of divisions with four, six, and eight being the most common. Adding an extra lobe meant additional time, effort, and expense in the carving of the top. A nine-sided geometric design is difficult to layout and would have required either a trial-and-error approach, extensive knowledge of geometry, or training specific for the task.

In the 1989 article, Gusler associated the nine-section tea tables with the Williamsburg cabinet shop of Peter Scott and the makers it influenced. While Pl. XI in Gusler's article is now attributed to the work of Robert Walker, Figures 14 and 15 are taken by Gusler to be eastern Virginia products, perhaps Norfolk or Williamsburg. Gusler never delves into what compelled a cabinetmaker to use a more difficult-to-execute nine-section design.

Masonic Influence Across States

Approximately 100 miles south of Williamsburg, a school of rural cabinetmakers, the Sharrocks of Bertie and Northampton Counties, North Carolina, carved nine-section rosettes for their crowning touch to large case pieces (Fig. 13, Sharrock cupboard with nine-sectioned rosettes) (Fig. 14, Nine-sectioned rosettes of Fig. 13).



Figure 13



Figure 14

What do these two areas, separated by what would have been a considerable overland distance during Colonial times, have in common with the number nine? Masonic lodges! There was likely a connection between the odd-numbered layouts and the culture of Masons. It may be a coincidence that nine-petal rosettes appear on furniture attributed to the Sharrock cabinetmaking family. Because Masons hold certain numbers in reverence, particularly 9, it's more likely there was a specific intent for the odd number designs.

There is a technique to layout nine-section, geometric designs with a compass, but it is complicated. Interestingly, another Sharrock piece at Hope Plantation has its original rosettes carved into thirteen-part sections (Fig. 15, Sharrock desk and bookcase with thirteen-section

rosettes) (Fig. 16, Thirteen-section rosettes of Fig. 15).



Figure 15



Figure 16

No compass-derived method to develop thirteen-sectioned designs could be found. It is unlikely the Sharrocks arbitrarily decided to use more difficult to layout and carve designs to crown their large sophisticated case pieces without a motive.

It may be that these odd numbered designs represent a purloined message between Masons. A Mason entering the house containing one of the nine sectioned designs or five-pointed, "floppy" stars would know the homeowner was a Mason without any outward gesture that might reveal their Masonic bond to the uninitiated. Typically, Masons used secret phrases, signs, or handshakes to communicate their mutual membership in their secretive society.

The culture of Masons was strongly in vogue during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and likely played a role. Why else would a craftsman expend extra time to layout a difficult geometric design and spend additional time carving more elements?

Visually, an eight- or nine-lobe rosette (flower) or "pie-crust", tea-table top is virtually indistinguishable to the uninitiated eye. In fact, most

citizens standing immediately by a nine-section pie-crust tea-table would never realize there was anything unusual about the top. Maybe that is the intent, a Mason owning a piece intended to alert other Mason visitors with a hidden message - you are a guest in the home of a fellow Mason.

It is also interesting that at least one Rhode Island high chest is crowned with nine-lobe rosettes, but all others found in researching this article use eight-lobe rosettes. Rhode Island furniture is similar artistically and by construction to the Sharrock's tall, broken-arch pieces. Newport design influence arrived in colonial Bertie and Northampton Counties via the Perquimans County cabinetmaker Thomas White. Also, Newport and Rhode Island furniture designs influenced the citizens of towns along and near the Atlantic coastline both via local cabinetmakers adopting design elements seen on venture cargo arriving from Newport and from Newport trained cabinetmakers who relocated to points south.

Masonic lodges were in Williamsburg, near the Sharrocks, in Newport, Rhode Island, and several points in between. Benjamin Bucktrout was a member of the Williamsburg Masonic Lodge. He is credited as the maker of the Master's Chair that was originally housed at the Edenton Masonic Lodge until 1983 when it was purchased by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

A Masonic lodge was established near the Sharrocks and Seays and reached prominence as others further east faded. Windsor's Royal Edwin Lodge suspended operation soon after the Davie Lodge began operation in 1797 at Sandy Run, less than two miles from the Sharrocks and Seays. The Davie Lodge moved approximately six miles east to Lewiston in 1799 when it was chartered. Lodge records do not explain these changes, but economics is probably the primary driving force as the wealth of the planters grew along this section of the Roanoke River. The Sharrocks and Seays created these pieces to satisfy their market, and their market during this period was increasingly wealthy and

increasingly influenced by the popularity of the Masonic movement.

Freemasonry was popular among craftsmen and influential citizens during the time the Sharrocks and Seays were active. George Washington was an active Mason, and nine of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence were apparently Masons. Using secret symbols, signs, and handshakes, any Mason traveling to a lodge or the home of another Mason would be welcomed. This across-state relationship created opportunities as an important communications path along which news and ideas traveled as Colonial America moved towards separation with Great Britain. During the Revolutionary War, there were a number of instances when Masons on both sides extended special treatment to another Mason even though their two countries were at war.

So, was the cabinetmaker who made the nine-section, tea-table tops shown in Gusler's article or the maker of this previously unpublished, 9-section tea table, shown in Figure 17, a Mason?



Figure 17

Were the Sharrocks and Seays Masons? Was the cabinetmaker who made the high chest in Rhode Island a Mason? Were the “odd” pieces and those made in the Seay cabinet shop with Masonic symbols sold to Masons? The only way to know with certainty would be to review the historic membership rolls of the Masonic lodges. Unfortunately, many of the membership rolls of the earliest Masonic lodges have been lost. Also, it was the custom during the eighteenth century to destroy all written and printed documents to avoid them falling into the hands of non-Masons. In Colonial times, even the membership certificate of each Brother was destroyed upon his death.

A number of interesting “near associations” are known. Governor David Stone, the original owner of Hope Plantation, studied law under William R. Davie, a seven-time, Grand Master in North Carolina. However, we are unable to determine if Stone was a Mason. Colonial patriot Whitmell Hill’s grandson was buried with Masonic ritual, but we could not determine whether or not Whitmell himself was also a Mason (Fig.18, Grave of Whitmell John Hill).



Figure 18

The case pieces created by William Seay for Whitmell Hill and his children, known as the WH group, contain stars in their tympanums with six points rather than five points (Fig. 19, Seay cupboard, WH group) (Fig. 20, Tympanum of Fig. 19).



Figure 19



Figure 20

There are three possibilities. Hill was not a Mason. He did not wish to broadcast that he was a Mason, or his vanity prevented Hill from sharing the spotlight of the imagery that most concerned him, his own WH initials prominently displayed in the tympanums of these pieces, with Masonic imagery such as the five-pointed star. Hopefully, this article or ongoing research will “fill in some of the blanks”.

The Origins of Freemasons

The origins of the Freemasons date back to Medieval stonemasons who built cathedrals, castles, and other stone structures during the Middle Ages. They were skilled masters in the art of sculpting stone, complex engineering, and geometry; they were scholars and architects. They formed guilds and set fair labor rates and terms of employment for

masters of the craft and were effectively a union. In the seventeenth century, the guilds opened membership to intellectual men of good quality with the means to pay membership dues. This was the beginning of speculative masonry, the current form of Freemasons.

Freemasons are a society that employs secret rituals and symbols to initiate, promote, and identify members. Freemasonry teaches morality using symbols, ideals, and philosophy that evolved from stonemasons. Many of the illustrative symbols used by Freemasons are based on the tools of medieval or renaissance stonemasons and symbols from that time. Sources for the symbols and rituals include imagined representations of Solomon's Temple.

Freemasonry stands for freedom of political thought; for freedom of religious thought; for the dignity, importance, and worth of the individual. In Freemasonry, there is no religious sect. Men of all religions join hands in kneeling about a common Altar erected to the Great Architect of the Universe, by which each individual can worship as he believes.

Freemasonry in America

During the eighteenth century, Freemasons aligned with the Enlightenment and the anti-monarchical ideals of revolutionaries. Some of the more notable founding fathers who were also prominent Masons include: George Washington, Ben Franklin, James Madison, James Monroe, Paul Revere, John Hancock, and Chief Justice John Marshall of the Supreme Court. The Marquis de Lafayette, who joined in the American Revolution, was a Mason.

Continental Masonry rites differ from those found in the British craft. In France, Masons were more political and were a source of the democratic thought underlying the French Revolution. Because of the political alignment of Continental Freemasonry, extreme enmity developed between Freemasons and the Roman Catholic Church, which was

aligned with royal families of Europe. Because England broke with Rome during the Reformation during the sixteenth century, Great Britain's Masons had a more apolitical stance.

The input of Freemasonry in the founding of the Republic can be found on the dollar bill, which hails the coming of the "ordo nuevo seculorum," the "new order of the ages" and the pyramid topped with the all-seeing eye.

Perhaps George Washington said it best: *“Being persuaded that a just application of the principles, on which the Masonic Fraternity is founded, must be promote of private virtue and public prosperity, I shall always be happy to advance the interests of the Society, and to be considered by them as a deserving brother.”*

The bottom line of being a Mason based on evidence untainted by religious views is to create a better man and a better world. Masons did this in America by pushing to separate from Great Britain, which was the only way they could create religious freedom for their country. *Note: In Colonial America the Anglican Church was the state sponsored religion and was funded by taxes.*

Other notable Masons include: James Hoban, Irish architect of the White House, Mozart, who's triumphantly successful opera, *Magic Flute*, promoted Masonic ideals, and Napoleon and his generals.

Readers wanting to learn more can find many books and much Internet content on Freemasons. Be aware that other groups and institutions oppose the free-thinking promoted by Freemasons. For example, because Freemasons place no religion or holy text above another, the Catholic Church warns its members of excommunication if they become Freemasons.

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