A Monticello Joinery Chair?

An Examination of the Evidence

By

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During his tenure at Colonial Williamsburg, Wallace Gusler served as Master Gunsmith, Curator of Mechanical Arts, Curator of Furniture, and Director of Conservation. He is a scholar, author, and first-class craftsman and artist. Gusler pioneered the approach of looking at historic objects from the perspective of the maker of the object. He has often expressed his approach as follows: "If you want to understand an object, carefully examine every detail of the object and listen to what it is trying to tell you".

At first glance, this curious armchair appears to be a simple, country-made example from the South, possibly the Virginia Piedmont (Fig. 1, Vernacular armchair). However, it is far more interesting than just a vernacular chair, and it definitely has a story to tell.

Figure 1

As our good friend, John Bivins, always said, the first step in attempting to determine the origin of an object is first to eliminate locations where it was not made. As that query is applied to this unusual armchair, based on its appearance and proportions, the list of locales where it was not made is extensive and almost all-inclusive. The armchair is constructed of walnut. (The inlayed strips on the front and outside surfaces of the lower front legs are not thought to be original. They were probably added at a later time in an attempt to update this armchair.) It contains rounded two-piece, vertically laminated, poplar blocks in its front corners and rounded one-piece, poplar blocks in its back corners, one of which is replaced (Fig. 2, Front seat blocks of Fig. 1) (Fig. 3, Rear seat blocks of Fig. 1).

Figure 2

Figure 3

Blocking of this form was popular in Philadelphia and also was used in Virginia. The seat rail interiors are roughly finished and are indicative of the hand of a rural craftsman. The armchair's square proportions are its most unusual and striking feature. Its front rail measures twenty-one inches, its back rail measures nineteen and one-half inches, and its seat is nineteen inches deep. The width of its crest matches that of the back rail at nineteen and one-half inches, while its rear feet are just slightly wider than twenty inches (Fig. 4, Square seat proportions of Fig. 1).

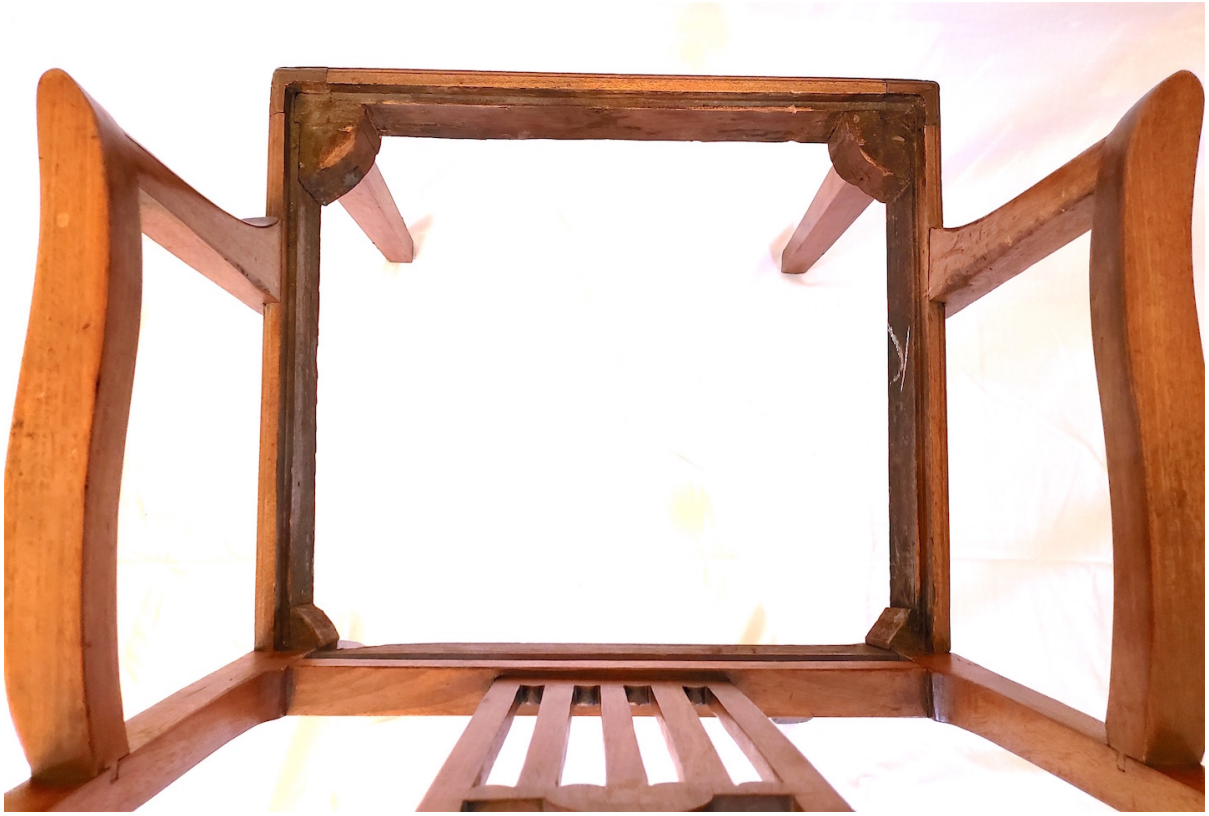

Figure 4

The armchair's overall appearance is most reminiscent of French neoclassical furniture of the second half of the eighteenth century. This helps explain why an earlier owner of this armchair was convinced that it was the product of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello Joinery and reflective of the style that so enamored Jefferson during his service as American ambassador to France from 1784 to 1789. Was the earlier owner correct in his attribution of this armchair to the Monticello Joinery?

Another armchair that bears a striking resemblance to the proportions and stance of this armchair, although of a different design, is in the collection of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and is attributed to the Monticello Joinery (See *Southern Furniture 1680-1830*, by Ronald L. Hurst and Jonathan Prown, pp. 142-146). Both chairs share the same

straight tapered front legs that are indicative of work attributed to the Joinery, and the sweep of the rear legs is very similar (Fig. 5, Side view of Fig. 1, showing sweep of rear legs).

Figure 5

Both chairs also have full thickness rear seat rails (See Fig. 3). The Colonial Williamsburg armchair does have one feature that differs from other chairs historically attributed to the Joinery. Its side rails are secured to the stiles with tall, narrow through-tenons. The description of the armchair in *Southern Furniture...* notes that a number of joiners hired by Jefferson to work at Monticello had previously worked in Philadelphia, where like through-tenons were often employed. It also should be noted that Jefferson lived in Philadelphia in the early 1790's during his term as Secretary of State. While there, he purchased furniture from Philadelphia cabinetmakers, John Aitken, William Long, and Joseph Barry.[1] The side rails of the armchair in question are also secured to the stiles with tall, narrow through-tenons that are very similar in appearance to those found on the Williamsburg chair (Fig. 6, Rear view of Fig. 1 showing through-tenons) (Fig. 7, Close up of through-tenon on Fig. 1).

Figure 6

Figure 7

A distinctive feature found on this walnut armchair is the treatment of the ends of its arms. Rather than being heavily rounded or scrolled, they gently slope, or taper, to the side to a rounded point (Fig. 8, End of arm treatment of Fig. 1).

Figure 8

This same end of arm treatment, here set horizontally, is found on an armchair firmly attributed to the Monticello Joinery (See Hurst and Prown, p. 145, Fig. 39.2). Jefferson returned from France in 1789 with 48 chairs, including a number of armchairs made by Parisian cabinetmaker, Georges Jacob. The Monticello armchair was constructed in the Joinery as a copy of one of these French armchairs, although its end of arm treatment has nothing in common with the French prototype. It was said to have been a gift from Jefferson to Judge James Steptoe of Lynchburg, Virginia.[2]

The tops of the front and side rails of the walnut armchair are ornamented with an ovolo molding (See Fig. 7). Although found on a number of chairs of this period, it is a feature indicative of Joinery work. Similar ovolo molding is found on the rails of dumbwaiters built at the Joinery.[3] This same type molding is also found on the tops of the front and side rails of a series of side chairs that in the past have been attributed to the Joinery but are now thought possibly to be the work of James Dinsmore or John Neilson after they had left Jefferson's employ at Monticello (See Hurst and Prown, p. 146, Fig. 39.3).[4] Whether these side chairs, some found in cherry and some in walnut, were constructed at the Joinery or were constructed by craftsmen after they had left the Joinery, they display the same French neoclassical influence found on the walnut armchair in question. All contain straight tapered front legs, with stiles that trend downward to create sweeping rear legs, as well as square proportions so indicative of the style that captivated Mr. Jefferson during his years in France.

One construction feature, highly unusual and perhaps unique to the Monticello Joinery, is felt to be an important clue in the identification of Joinery cabinetry. It is found on a series of filing presses built at the Joinery and used to store Jefferson's papers. The presses stand about three feet tall and twenty inches wide. One contains inscriptions in Jefferson's hand.

The shelves of these presses are secured to the sides in a highly unusual way. Short tenons extend from the front and back of each side of a shelf. These tenons fit into vertical dados, or channels, run in the interior case sides. The shelves therefore must be slid into position as one would insert a structural element of a building frame into a chase

mortise. Chase mortises are found in the structure of the Monticello's east portico.[5] Distance between shelves is fixed with filler spacers inserted into the vertical dados. Conventional cabinetry would run horizontal dados into the inner case sides, then slide the shelf into place from the front or rear of the case. So, there must have been a compelling reason to expend the time and effort to construct the short-tenon method of shelf attachment rather than conventional horizontal dado joinery. The most obvious purpose for the use of these short tenons was to secure each shelf to the filing press case sides and prevent potential movement. These filing presses were also used to transport Jefferson's papers. A shelf set in a conventional horizontal dado might slip out of place if the press was tilted during transport, possibly damaging the press or spilling its contents. Another way to secure the shelves would be to drive nails or screws through the exterior sides of the case into the ends of the shelves. However, this method would be unsightly and would likely cause the sides of the press and/or the shelves to split as the wood contracted and expanded seasonally. So, these short tenons are a unique way to secure the shelves and prevent potential movement while lessening the chance of damaging the piece of furniture.

The authors are aware of only one other instance where similar short tenons are inserted into dados on a piece of furniture for the purpose of restricting the movement of a structural element beyond the stability offered by conventional joinery methods. The same technique is used on the walnut armchair that is the subject of this article. Here, a short tenon is cut horizontally on the end of each arm and is fitted into a shallow, open mortise or dado in each stile. (Fig. 9, Short tenon in open mortise or dado of Fig. 1) (Fig. 10, Back assembly of Fig. 1 showing short tenons on inner surface of arms).

Figure 9

Figure 10

The arms are secured to the stiles using a conventional joinery technique with screws inserted from the rear of the stiles into the ends of the arms (see Fig. 6). The short tenons function further to restrict rotational movement of the arms. As unusual as this construction feature appears to be, it is probable, even likely, that the maker of the filing presses prevented potential movement of their shelves beyond the stability

offered by conventional joinery methods by adapting a previously learned technique used to add additional stability to the arms of this armchair. If the armchair is laid on its side, thereby creating short, vertical tenons set in vertical dados, the relationship between the filing-press shelf attachment and method used further to stabilize the arms of the armchair is even more obvious (Fig. 11, Vertical view of chair tenons.

Figure 11

The use of these short tenons is an example of that rare instance when a construction technique used in case construction can be equated to a construction technique used in chair joinery. In both instances, the craftsman used a short tenon, set in a dado, to restrict the movement of part of a piece of furniture. This may well be a construction signature unique to furniture made at the Monticello Joinery.

One last piece of evidence related to the possible origin of this walnut armchair needs to be considered. Incised into the back of the chair's front rail are the initials DW (Fig. 12, DW incised on back of front rail of Fig. 1 {top of Fig. 12}. The enhancement {bottom of Fig. 12} was created from our personal observations of the incised initials on Fig 1).

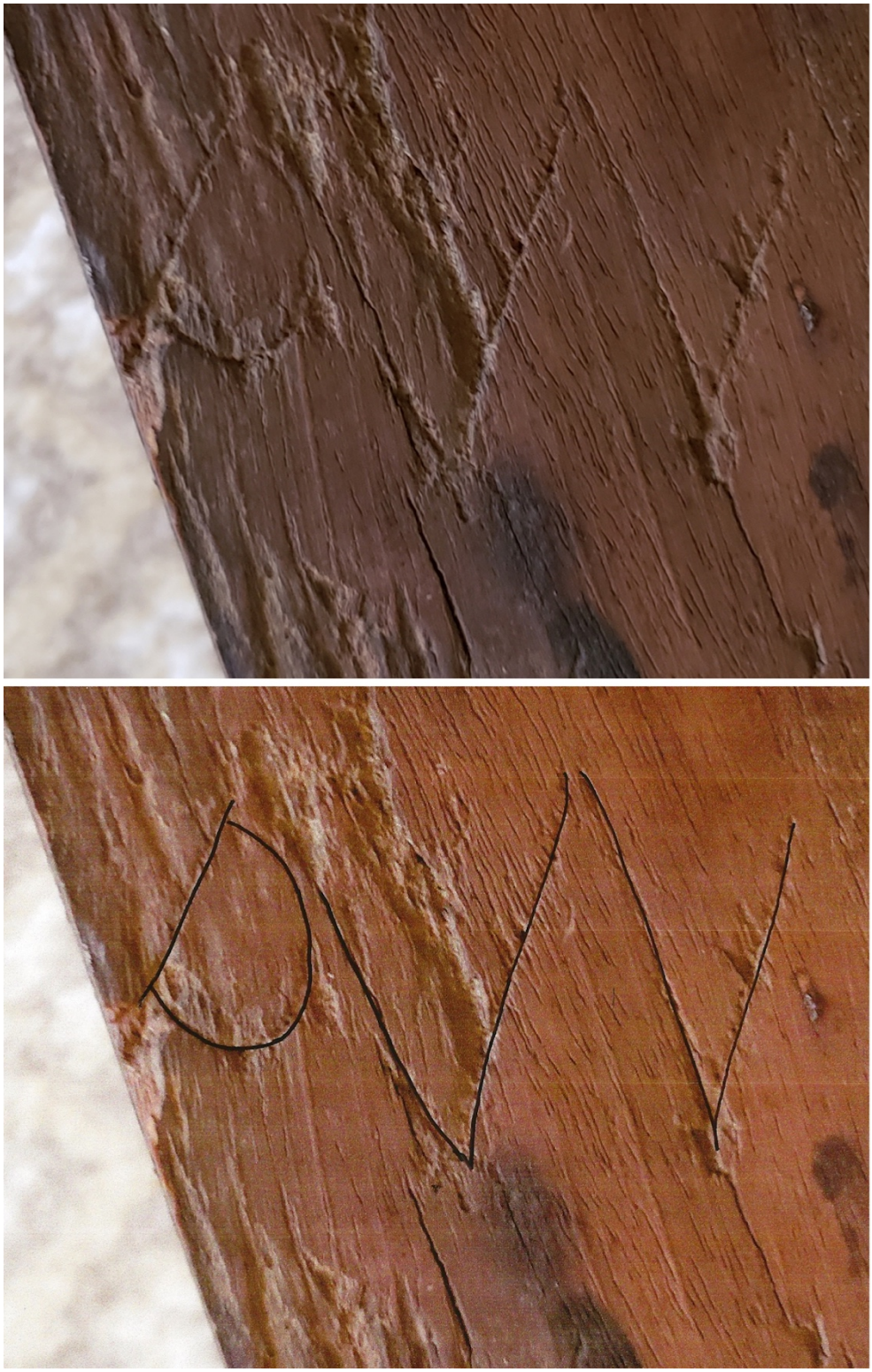

Figure 12

So, the question becomes, considering all the prior physical and stylistic characteristics, decorative features, and a possibly unique construction detail that point to the Monticello Joinery as this armchair's place of origin, was there a craftsman who worked at the Joinery who may have been involved in the production of furniture, specifically armchairs, with the initials DW?

The answer is yes. David Watson was a British army deserter that Jefferson located in Richmond, Virginia, in 1781. He was a house joiner by trade. Jefferson hired him at a rate of 3000 pounds of tobacco per year or the equivalent in paper and sent him to Monticello in April 1781. Watson worked at Monticello until 1784.[6] At times, Watson complained to Jefferson of his economically depressed state, but records from Monticello show that a great deal of his wages went to the purchase of whiskey. Isaac Jefferson, an enslaved tinsmith, nail-maker, and blacksmith, remembered Watson and his friend, blacksmith Billy Ore. Isaac recalled that "Both workmen, both smoked pipes, and both drinkers. Drank whiskey; git drunk and sing; take a week at a time drinking and singing".[7]

When he was not drinking and singing, Watson was a talented woodworker. In addition to house carpentry, he was also a wheelwright. He made wheels for carts, wagons, wheelbarrows, and phaetons. Watson is credited by Isaac Jefferson with constructing Thomas Jefferson's personal phaeton.[8] In a letter dated March 2, 1784, Thomas Jefferson mentioned that Watson was constructing stairs at Monticello. Jefferson also gave Watson the responsibility of laying off the timber yard on Mulberry Row, a line of workshops and residences of craftsmen, both enslaved and free, located just south of the main house.[9]

After leaving Jefferson's employ at Monticello, Watson performed woodworking tasks at neighboring plantations. In 1786, he worked for John Coles at Enniscorthy. There we discover Watson's skills as a cabinetmaker. Coles' account book records that Watson repaired a table and an easy chair. He built a sideboard for four pounds and a bedstead for 1.8 pounds. Watson also constructed a six-foot by four-foot table along with twelve chairs and two armchairs. So, Watson did have the skill set to have constructed the armchair in question. Watson was next scheduled to work for Colonel Edward Carter at nearby Blenheim Plantation. Watson's skills were in such high demand that Coles paid Watson an extra six shillings to remain at Enniscorthy a bit longer and delay his arrival at Blenheim. Isaac Jefferson also noted that Watson "...worked also for Col. Carter of Blenheim, eight miles from Monticello".[10]

Watson's whereabouts are unknown until 1790. On March 7 of that year, Jefferson wrote from Richmond, Virginia, "Watson attacks me here with his account", apparently referring to a dispute over Watson's wages. Considering Watson's account with Jefferson had been settled in 1784, this probably represents recent work performed at Monticello. In September 1792, Watson was paid for an additional twenty-one days of work at Monticello.[11] At that time, Jefferson was in Philadelphia serving as Secretary of State in President Washington's administration. Jefferson's son-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph, husband of Jefferson's daughter, Martha, often managed affairs at Monticello in Jefferson's absence. On May 8, 1793, Randolph wrote to Jefferson about the prospect of offering further training to enslaved craftsmen at Monticello. Randolph wrote, "I think it would be better to employ some industrious white person to labor with them and lay off their work for them".[12] The craftsman chosen by Jefferson was David Watson.

On October 22, 1793, Jefferson wrote, “I have agreed with Watson to come and work for me at 120 D. a year, 500 lb pork and corn”. In a memorandum to Randolph, Jefferson gave specific instructions as to where and how Watson was to be used. He was apparently working at a nearby plantation at this time. Jefferson instructed, “The wagon is to be sent for him on Monday Nov. 4 to bring his things”. Watson was to work and lodge in the shop near the sawpit. He placed Watson in charge of carpenters during inclement weather as they fabricated shingles for buildings. Jefferson also specified Watson’s role with enslaved woodworker John Hemmings, who was then 18 years of age. “Johnny is to work with him (Watson) for the purpose of learning to make wheels, and all sorts of work.”[13] This last phrase reflects Watson’s broad range of woodworking skills and undoubtedly includes cabinetmaking. This is a likely explanation why some elements, such as the shape of the ends of the arms and the short tenons used to stabilize furniture components, are found on both the armchair marked DW as well as later Joinery cabinetry constructed by, or under the direction of, John Hemmings. Hemmings first training as a cabinetmaker and a woodworker was received from David Watson. Watson’s tutelage of Hemmings began when Hemmings was 18 years of age and continued for approximately four years. He was essentially Watson’s apprentice. This also offers an explanation why Watson would have felt the need to mark his work product to distinguish it from his trainee’s production.

Jefferson’s memorandum to Randolph continued with detailed and specific instructions not only for what Watson was to work on, but also for the order in which Watson was to perform the tasks. Jefferson even specified which woods were to be employed in some instances. This was a period of time that Jefferson was actually present at Monticello.

Jefferson resigned his post as Secretary of State on December 31, 1793, left Philadelphia, and arrived at Monticello on January 16, 1794. Upon his return from France in 1789, Jefferson only enjoyed a few weeks at Monticello before joining the Washington administration. His appreciation for French neoclassical design had not waned since his return from France with 86 crates of French goods.[14] Is the French influenced armchair bearing the initials DW, that is the subject of this article, another example of Jefferson's detailed instructions to Watson?

Jefferson was well aware of Watson's skills as a cabinetmaker. On December 15, 1793, he instructed Watson to construct a writing desk for his daughter, Mary Jefferson Eppes. Years later, John Hemmings built a writing desk for Jefferson's granddaughter, Ellen Randolph Coolidge. The skills used by Hemmings in making the writing desk were probably first taught by Watson. Unfortunately, the writing desk built by Hemmings was lost at sea.[15]

Watson continued working at Monticello and undoubtedly continued his training of John Hemmings until December 1797. The years 1793 through 1797 were a period of great change at Monticello. Under Jefferson' personal direction, initial demolition of parts of Monticello One began. The foundations of what became Monticello Two were begun to be laid. Activity on Mulberry Row increased, including the establishment of a nail manufactory. When he left Monticello in late 1797, Watson went to work for Thomas Mann Randolph, Jefferson's son-in-law. This was around the time work was beginning on Randolph's new home, Edgehill. On February 15, 1798, Jefferson wrote to Randolph and inquired, "How does Watson answer your purpose?"[16] This is the last know reference to Watson.

Considering the similarity in form and construction between the DW marked armchair and the armchair in the collection in the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation discussed earlier in this article, the descent history of the Williamsburg chair is worth noting. That chair descended in the Nicholas family. Anne Cary Nicholas, widow of Robert Carter Nicholas of Williamsburg, moved her family to Albemarle County in 1781. Her family maintained close ties with Jefferson. Her son, Wilson Cary Nicholas, served as Governor of Virginia and also had close ties with Jefferson. His daughter married Jefferson's grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph. Randolph was the son of Thomas Mann Randolph, Jefferson's son-in-law and whose property was the location of David Watson's employment after he left Monticello in December 1797.[17] Craftsmen such as Watson often relied on clients' family ties to secure their next employment opportunity. This may explain the construction ties between these two chairs, especially the tall narrow through-tenons, a construction feature highly unusual in Piedmont Virginia furniture.

To this point in our examination of the walnut armchair and the belief by an earlier owner that the chair was constructed at the Monticello Joinery, the following information has been revealed:

1. The armchair's square stance and dimensions are indicative of other examples of furniture in the French neoclassical style produced at the Monticello Joinery after Jefferson's return from France in 1789 and his return to Monticello in early 1794.
2. Construction and decorative features found on the armchair are consistent with like features found on furniture attributed to the Monticello Joinery, including the full thickness back rail, the ovolo molding found on the front and side rails, the straight, tapered front legs, the gentle slope of the ends of the chair's arms,

and the tall, narrow through-tenons securing the chair's rails to the chair's stiles.

3. The short tenons set in dados further secure the chair's arms to the chair's stiles, in the same manner that the short tenons set in dados found on Jefferson's filing presses secure their shelves to the case sides, a feature, that if not unique to the Monticello Joinery, is certainly highly unusual.
4. The initials incised on the back of the armchair's front rail match the initials of the craftsman who, in addition to carpentry and wheel-wright skills, also constructed furniture, including armchairs, and whose training of John Hemmings at Jefferson's instruction offers an explanation of why all of the above features found on the armchair are later found on furniture produced by Hemmings or under his direction at the Monticello Joinery.

One final question remains. What, if any, is the meaning and significance of the walnut armchair's distinctive and unusual splat (Fig. 13, Splat of Fig. 1).

Figure 13

In his recent article on this website,[18] Peyton Collie discussed the use of Masonic symbols on Southern furniture. Some owners wanted all to know they were Freemasons, so they often had furniture pieces embellished with obvious Masonic symbols. However, other owners were less overt about their Masonic membership. They opted for less obvious Masonic imagery on their furniture, imagery that would be recognized by fellow Masons but would go unnoticed by the uninitiated.

The splat of the chair being discussed in this article (see Fig. 13) is a case in point. In fact, it is composed of no less than four, covert, Masonic symbols. These covert symbols would not be lost on fellow Masons, but they would keep uninformed non-Masons from actually seeing too much Masonic iconography.

In interpreting these covert Masonic symbols, it is helpful to see some images containing overt examples. Figure 14 shows the stairway to heaven, the five classical orders for columns (Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Composite), and the stonemason's arch or arch of heaven (Fig. 14, Sketch of Masonic stairway to heaven).

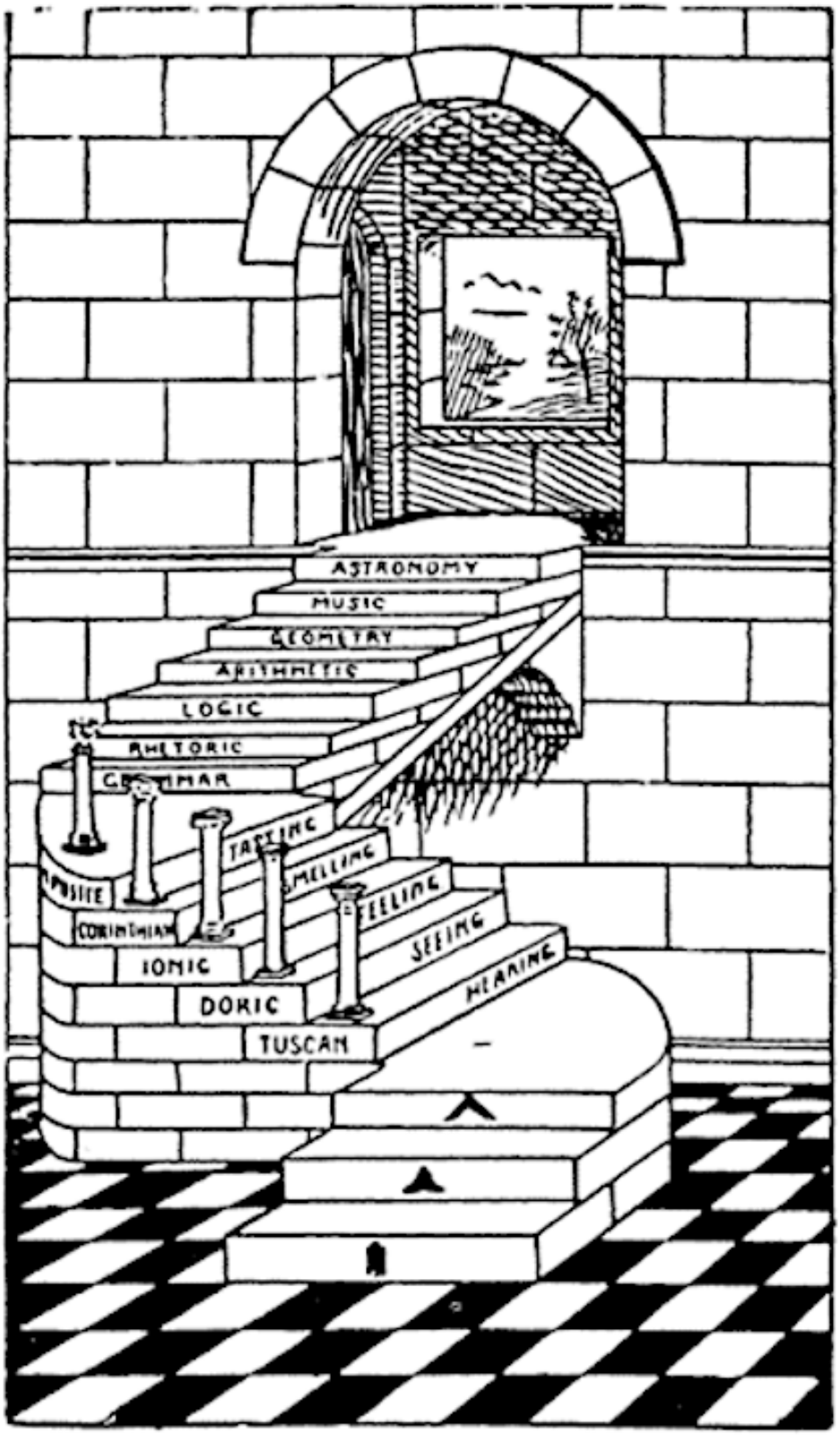
ASTRONOMY
MUSIC
GEOMETRY
ARITHMETIC
LOGIC
RHETORIC
GRAMMAR
TASTING
SMELLING
FEELING
SEEING
HEARING
CORINTHIAN
IONIC
DORIC
TUSCAN

Figure 14

The circa 1770, monumental, Masonic Master's chair in Figure 15, signed by Williamsburg cabinetmaker, Benjamin Bucktrout, exhibits additional Masonic symbols. They include the arch of heaven, several 24-inch folding rules, and the sun, among other symbols (Fig. 15, Bucktrout Masonic Master's chair, photo courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Museum Purchase, Acc. # 1983-317).

Figure 15

Figure 16 shows an actual 24-inch, folding rule. Another 24-inch, folding rule is incorporated in the back of an English Masonic chair in Figure 17 (Fig. 17, Masonic chair folding rule, photo courtesy of Tara Chicirda).

Figure 16

Figure 17

Having viewed the above images of Masonic symbols, it is easy to recognize the covert Masonic symbols in the splat of our study chair (see Fig. 13). The five vertical elements in the splat represent the five classical orders. The semi-circle resting on these five elements

represents the rising sun. The rectangular element with the V-notch above the sun is a folding rule. The arched element above the rule represents the stonemason's arch or the arch of heaven. This chair clearly belonged to a Freemason. So, what are the implications of this?

If this chair was, indeed, built in the Monticello Joinery, did Jefferson instruct David Watson to build it for his personal use? If so, was Jefferson a Freemason? This question has been argued extensively, both for and against, for two centuries. We are not going to solve it here. Author, Todd E. Creason, a believer that Jefferson was a Mason, briefly summarizes both sides in his online paper,[19] and it is worth quoting part of his discussion here for background perspective. Creason states:

"...Most Masonic scholars take the position that he was not a Mason because there is no contemporary evidence that he ever belonged to a lodge of Freemasons. Most of the claims of his membership are based on his close associations with so many other Masons: George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Paul Jones, James Monroe, Lewis Meriwether, William Clark, and Voltaire. However, there is some evidence that indicates he may have been a Mason and that he attended Masonic meetings. Dr. Joseph Guillotin reported that he attended meetings at the prestigious Lodge of Nine Muses in Paris, France—the same lodge attended by Voltaire, Benjamin Franklin, and John Paul Jones. He marched in a Masonic procession with Widow's Son Lodge No. 60 and Charlottesville Lodge No. 90 on October 6, 1817, and participated in laying the cornerstone for Central College (now known as the University of Virginia.) In 1801, twenty-five years prior to his death, a lodge was chartered in Surry Court House, Virginia—it was named Jefferson Lodge No. 65, and most notably, upon his death on July 4, 1826, both the Grand Lodge of South Carolina and the Grand Lodge

of Louisiana held Masonic funeral rites and processions for him... If he wasn't a Mason, he clearly possessed all the prerequisites for membership, and his beliefs, his philosophies, and his great skill in architecture were certainly indicative of Masonic affiliation..."

In either case, if Jefferson commissioned David Watson to construct this chair in the Monticello Joinery while Watson was employed there, it would clearly indicate that Jefferson had an understanding of Freemason practices, beliefs, and iconography. Furthermore, it would indicate that Jefferson harbored no ill feelings toward Freemasonry as he did with the Society of the Cincinnati, a secret, aristocratically inclined organization.

If this is a Monticello Joinery chair and since there are no known other Masonic-influenced pieces of furniture, material culture, or personal writings documented to Jefferson, he probably did not have this chair built for his personal use. A more likely scenario would be that Jefferson intended it as a gift to one of his many Freemason friends/colleagues or to a family member, such as his son-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph, himself a Mason.

In a jury trial, the attorney with the weaker case will often attempt to convince the jury to consider only one of the many pieces of evidence out of the context of the entire case. The goal is to isolate and attack that single piece of evidence, hoping to get the jury to base its decision on that one piece of evidence alone, rather than to view the entire picture presented by all the evidence. The attorney with the stronger case will ask the jury to consider all the evidence, understanding that each of the pieces of evidence, when taken in the context of the whole, corroborate each other and show the jury the truth of the matter in controversy. Taking the evidence discovered from the examination of this unusual

walnut armchair as a whole, a compelling case has been made in favor of the opinion of the previous owner of this armchair, that it is, in fact, the product of Mr. Jefferson's Monticello Joinery.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

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