

Norfolk Furniture Reunited After 190 Years

By

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In the study of early American furniture, no detail should be overlooked. Each piece of evidence is worthy of consideration. Some observations may prove more probative than others, but all should be weighted, including overall style, inlay and carving, provenance or recovery history, primary and secondary woods, construction details, construction and assembly marks, and any signatures or initials. The full meaning of some of these details may not be known at the time of their discovery, but their documentation may allow future researchers a foundation upon which to understand more fully the piece's true history. Each component is a part of the story. If the goal is to discover the origins and history of a piece of furniture, one cannot include some of the evidence and disregard that which does not fit a preconceived belief. Two recent scholarly works, *In Plain Sight, Discovering the Furniture of Nathaniel Gould* and *Crafting Excellence, The Furniture of Nathan Lumbard and His Circle*, are excellent examples of this inclusive method of discovery.

A case in point involves two pieces of furniture attributed to the shop of Norfolk, Virginia, cabinetmaker, James Woodward. The first, a chest with butler's drawer and bookcase, was discovered during research that led to

the publication of *Classical Norfolk Furniture, 1810-1840* (Fig. 1, Chest with butler's drawer and bookcase).



Figure 1

It descended in the Green family of Churchland, Virginia, located just west of Portsmouth. It is one of a number of related chests and presses made in Woodward's shop between 1825 and the late 1830s. Most, including this example, originally had scrolled front feet. Unfortunately, almost all were later modified to turned front feet more closely matching their original turned rear feet.

The construction of the drawers of the butler's drawer matches the construction of the drawers of a series of miniature chests and small mirror stands built in Woodward's shop during the same period (Fig. 2, Miniature chest) (Fig. 3, Mirror stand).



Figure 2



Figure 3

The drawer dovetails, including kerf marks, and the beveled upper rear edges of the drawer sides all match. The flat drawer bottoms of both the

small drawers of the butler's drawer and the drawers of the series of miniature chests and mirror stands are set in dadoed drawer fronts and sides, nailed in the rear, and further secured with glue. The rear edges of the drawer sides of the drawers of the butler's drawer and the drawers of the miniature chests and mirror stands are also beveled (Fig. 4, Drawer of Fig. 1) (Fig. 5, Drawer of Fig. 2) (Fig. 6, Drawer of Fig. 3) (Fig. 7, Drawer of Fig. 8).



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

Most, but not all, of the drawer bottoms extend beyond the back of the drawer thus forming an integral drawer stop (See Figs. 5 & 7).

The second piece from Woodward's shop to be considered in this article is a large mirror stand with a prospect door set between double drawers (Fig. 8, Large mirror stand).



Figure 8

The prospect lowers to reveal three interior drawers with maple-veneered fronts (Fig. 9, Interior of Fig. 8). When closed, the prospect door locks the exterior drawers in place.



Figure 9

The drawer construction of this mirror stand's drawers exactly matches the distinctive construction features of the drawers of the butler's drawer and the drawers of the series of miniature chests and mirror stands (See Figures 4 through 7). The drawer construction is so distinctive that it is obvious that all of these pieces originated in the same shop.

The chest with butler's drawer and bookcase was purchased in a Portsmouth antique shop, and the large mirror stand was purchased in an antique shop in Tappahannock, Virginia, on Virginia's Middle Peninsula. Both currently reside in the same collection. Upon acquiring the chest with bookcase, the owner noticed that the veneers used along the rails and stiles of the chest's front were composed of sections of veneer featuring the

round ends of figured mahogany. Upon acquiring the mirror stand, the owner noticed that the double drawers on either side of the prospect door had fronts highlighted with sections of veneer with the round ends of figured mahogany cut off.

Mahogany logs were imported into both Richmond and Norfolk. Large cabinet shops often cut their own veneers from these logs. So, could it be possible that the veneers used on these two pieces of furniture constructed in James Woodward's Norfolk cabinet shop during the same period were cut from the same mahogany log?

An upper exterior drawer was removed from the mirror stand and placed against the case stile of the chest with bookcase. The grain patterns found on the two sections of veneer were certainly closely aligned, although not a perfect match. Perhaps the veneer on this section of the chest and the veneer on the mirror stand drawer were from different depths in the same mahogany log. As the mirror drawer was moved around the rails and stiles of the chest, evidence mounted that they could be from the same log.

Irrefutable proof was found at the bottom rail of the chest. The rounded grain of the veneer along the front of the chest's lower rail lined up exactly with the grain of the veneer of the mirror stand drawer. The second upper exterior mirror stand drawer was placed under another section of veneer on the chest's lower rail, and the grains again lined up perfectly. In fact, when the two lower exterior drawers of the mirror stand were reunited with the

upper drawers, the height of the chest off the floor allowed both sets of mirror-stand drawers to be perfectly fit under the chest's lower rail. These sections of veneer cut from a mahogany log in James Woodward's Norfolk cabinet shop were reunited for the first time in approximately 190 years (Fig. 10, Veneers of Fig. 1 and Fig. 8 reunited) (Fig. 11, Veneers of Fig. 1 and Fig. 8 reunited).



Figure 10



Figure 11

Details matter. Observations matter. The documentation of findings matters. While the odds of reuniting two pieces of mahogany veneer separated almost two centuries ago are probably too great to determine mathematically, it does happen. So, perhaps veneer patterns should be added to the list of furniture details worthy of notice. Of course, this one would only appeal to those with the borderline obsessive tendencies

present in only the most driven students of early American furniture. In this case those tendencies paid off, and these two examples of the craftsmanship of Norfolk cabinetmaker, James Woodward, currently reside within feet of each other for the first time since leaving his shop 190 years ago.

Bibliography

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