

# Monticello Joinery Armchair: A Fresh Look

By Tom Newbern and Jim Melchor

The old saying goes that whether you are dealing with a situation or, in this case, an antique chair, it is always helpful to employ a fresh look. As we readily admit, our article, recently published on this website, *A Monticello Joinery Chair?*, and Mike McNamara's follow-up research note, *Monticello Joinery Armchair: A Follow-up Research Note*, also on this website, prove the truth of this adage.

McNamara put his fresh set of eyes on the Masonic chair in our article. He observed, correctly so, that the chair's splat is a match for Monticello's west portico. His astute observation prompted us to take a fresh look ourselves at the chair.

Our original article examines a piedmont Virginia armchair that displays Masonic imagery (Fig. 1, Virginia Masonic chair).



Figure 1

We thoroughly discuss the details of this walnut armchair with poplar secondary wood. The chair is in the French neoclassical style that so enamored Thomas Jefferson during his service as Minister to France from 1784 to 1789. Its stance is very similar to an armchair in the Colonial Williamsburg Collection that is attributed to the Monticello Joinery. Both chairs also employ side rails through-tenoned into the stiles. The Williamsburg chair descended in the family of Anne Cary Nicholas, whose granddaughter married Jefferson's favorite grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph.

Further, we discuss decorative and construction details that tie the Masonic armchair to items produced at the Monticello Joinery. The unusual taper of the ends of the arms closely relates to the gentle slope of the arms of an armchair attributed to enslaved Joinery cabinetmaker, John Hemmings. Hemmings copied one of a set of French armchairs purchased by Jefferson while in France.

The arms of the Masonic armchair are fixed with screws inserted from the rear of the stiles. They are further secured, or rather locked in place, with a highly unusual short tenon slid into an open horizontal dado (Fig. 2, Arm tenoned into stile).



Figure 2

An analogous use of a short tenon to lock in an element of a piece of furniture is also found on an example attributed to Hemmings at the Joinery. Rather than securing the shelves of a series of portable filing presses made for Jefferson with conventional horizontal dadoes, Hemmings cut vertical dadoes into the front and back of each case side. Short tenons emitting from the ends of the shelves slid into the dadoes,

locking the shelves in place, preventing them from sliding out of the case. These tenons are very similar to those on the arms of the armchair.

Our examination of the Masonic armchair led to the discovery of two initials incised into the rear of the front rail of the chair. There are 676 possible combinations of letters of the alphabet of the same case. Of those 676, only three combinations match the three main individuals who might have been involved in furniture production for Jefferson at the Monticello Joinery: John Hemmings, JH, James Dinsmore, JD, and David Watson, DW. The initials found on the chair are DW (Fig. 3, DW initials on armchair).



Figure 3

A Watson connection to the Masonic armchair would offer an explanation of its relationship to furniture attributed to Hemmings at the Joinery.

Watson was hired by Jefferson in 1793 with specific instructions to train Hemmings in the skills of a woodworker. This training continued until Watson left Jefferson's employ in late 1797 and may explain the structural ties between the Masonic armchair and Hemmings' later work. Watson is known to have constructed chairs and armchairs at nearby Enniscorthy in 1786, and his primary work for Jefferson as a wheelwright and carriage maker could well explain the short tenon used to lock the arms of the chair in place. We contacted several cabinetmakers practicing the traditional arts to consult on the origins of the short tenons used to prevent movement of the arms of the Masonic armchair. All agreed that the use of such a joint was indicative of a craftsman dealing with wood under pressure or movement, such as a wheelwright or a carriage maker. Although the maker of the armchair was versed in the construction of an armchair, considering that the horizontal dadoes cut to secure the short tenons removed almost one third of the stock of the chair's stiles at very vulnerable stress points on the stiles, the maker was probably not trained as a chairmaker. In other words, an apt description of David Watson.

We noted the subtle Masonic imagery present in the splat of the armchair. Furniture was constructed at the Monticello Joinery at Jefferson's direction and instruction. Jefferson is known to have gifted furniture to friends. It

should also be noted that the years Watson was present at Monticello, 1793 until late 1797, were the same years Freemasonry first flourished in Albemarle County. Albemarle County's Door of Virtue Lodge No. 44 made its "first recording" in April, 1795. Jefferson's son-in-law, Thomas Mann Randolph, was an early member. Friend, Meriwether Lewis, and nephews, Peter and Samuel Carr, joined in early 1797. So, there were ample reasons to commission a covert Masonic chair during Watson's tenure.

These same years, 1793 through late 1797, mark not only Watson's presence at Monticello as he trained John Hemmings and the beginnings of Freemasonry in Albemarle County, but they also represent the first time that Jefferson remained at Monticello for any significant period of time since his years in France from 1784 to 1789. Jefferson therefore had the time to plan, design, and create drawings of what would come to be known as Monticello II, the Monticello we see today. The influence of French culture, architecture, and furniture is readily apparent as Jefferson began the lifetime process of dismantling and reconstructing Monticello. Watson would have had an integral role in this process during the years he was present.

This brings us to the armchair's splat. Its Masonic imagery is thoroughly discussed in our earlier article. What about the splat's unusual design? Was there a design source that would have been available to Watson at



Monticello? Whether at Jefferson's instruction or through Watson's access to Jefferson's drawings, the splat of the Masonic armchair, as McNamara observed, is a match for a two-dimensional drawing of what would become Monticello's west portico (Fig. 4, Chair splat and Fig. 5, Monticello's west portico) (These are Figs. 1 & 2 in McNamara's note.) Jefferson would have designed this feature during these years.



Figure 4



Figure 5

To quote from McNamara's research note: "The four negative or open spaces between the five lower elements of the splat, with demilunes at the top and bottom giving the illusion of roundness, mimic the four columns of the west portico. The outside edges of the Masonic arch in the splat line up with the outside edges of the exterior pair of openings, just as the outside



edges of Monticello's dome line up with the outside edges of the portico's exterior columns. Finally, the rising sun in the splat mimics the demilune in the west portico's pediment."

Jefferson was known for assimilating, modifying, and incorporating various architectural elements in his designs. He is also known to have designed furniture. Considering all the chair's connections to the Monticello Joinery between 1793 and late 1797, could the design of the splat of this piedmont Virginia armchair with Masonic imagery be another example?

## **Reference**

Newbern, Tom and Melchor, Jim, 2019, *A Monticello Joinery Chair? An Examination of the Evidence*: Edenton Historical Commission

[www.ehcnc.org](http://www.ehcnc.org)

McNamara, Mike, 2019, *Monticello Joinery Armchair: A Follow-up Research Note*: Edenton Historical Commission

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