

## **John Mitchener, Journeyman Carpenter of Edenton**

By

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Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, untold numbers of craftsmen and artisans labored to create the structures and furniture that define our image of the American South of that period. The vast majority remain nameless. Of the individuals who have been identified by name, it is a rare occasion when the signature of a maker, whether full signature or initials, is found on a piece of furniture. It is the rarest of occasions when that signature is found on a building, thus allowing an individual craftsman to be linked to his carpentry. The nature of furniture construction allows for the examination of its interior surfaces, where signatures are found when present. However, on structures, the full signature or initials of a journeyman or apprentice, often placed to identify his work product to his employer or master, are invariably hidden within the fabric of the building.

Fate had a hand in revealing just such a signature, here initials and a date, that were placed on a component during the construction of Edenton, North Carolina's Chowan County Courthouse of 1767 (Fig. 1, Edenton Courthouse of 1767).



Figure 1

In the early 1990s, a severe storm caused damage to the Courthouse roof. Water damaged the ceiling of the Courthouse's second floor assembly hall. The ceiling eventually fell, dislodging sections of the room's cornice (Fig. 2, Location of cornice damage).





Figure 2

Edenton master cabinetmaker, Don Jordan, was called in to exact repairs. On the front of the fascia board supporting the crown molding, Jordan discovered incised initials I X M, followed by a scratched in date, 1771. The same date was more legibly scratched into the same board a few inches to the right (Fig 3, Initials I X M and date 1771) (Fig. 4, Rubbings of initials and dates of Fig. 3).



Figure 3

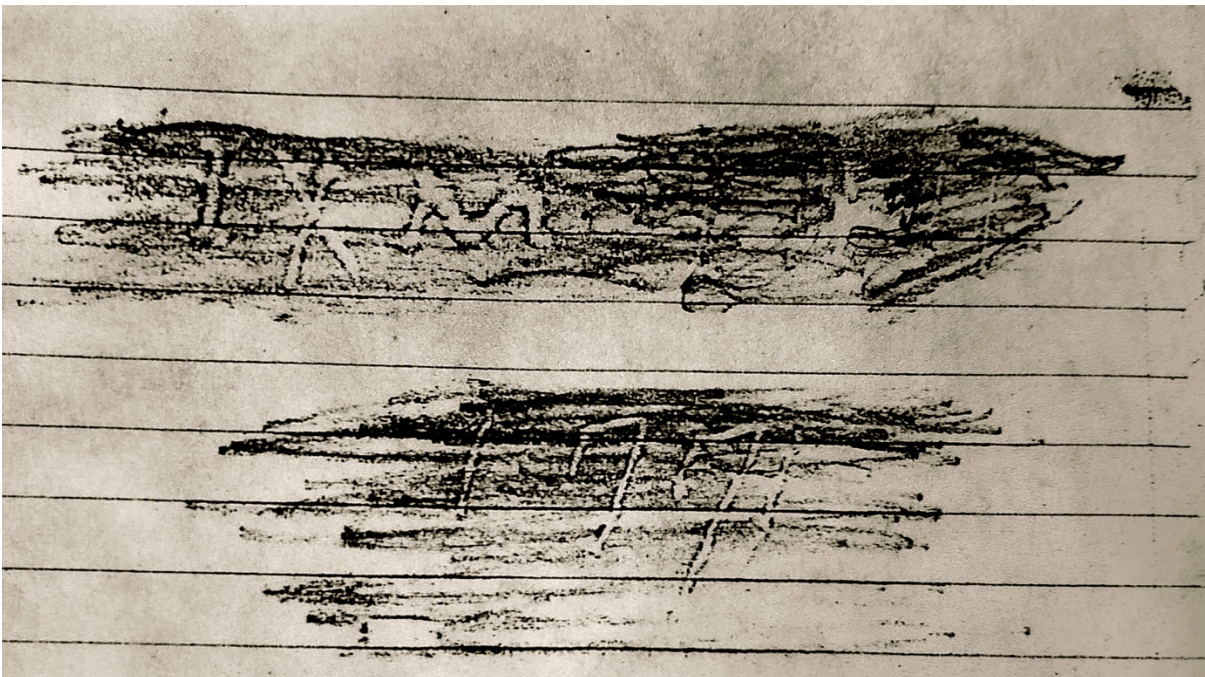


Figure 4

Jordan recognized that a capitol I of this period invariably represented a capitol J, and the X was used to separate the other two letter, making the initials J M. From its placement on a section of a board never meant to see the light of day, it can be safely assumed that the letters were placed on the board by someone engaged in the construction of the Courthouse. So, the question becomes who was J M, and what is the significance of the date 1771?

Any attempt to discover the identity of J M must necessarily begin with an examination of the building he was constructing. The Courthouse of 1767 is Edenton's second courthouse. The first has its origins in the November 1712 act of the North Carolina Colonial Assembly "to promote the building of a courthouse to hold the Assembly in, at the fork of Queen Anne's Creek." This Courthouse, a simple wood-frame structure, was in use by July 1718. Thanks to numerous repairs, it continued to serve Chowan County until the 1760s. In November 1766, a bill passed the Assembly to build a much-needed new courthouse and jail in Edenton District.<sup>1</sup>

On June 4, 1767, a notice was placed in Williamsburg's Virginia Gazette seeking bids to construct the new building. "To be let to the lowest undertaker...the building of a brick Court-House, 68 ft by 45. The builder will be furnished with bricks and lime, and may depend on punctual payments. The Trustees will attend with such a plan of the house, and



receive the proposals of such as incline to undertake the same. Bond and security will be required.”<sup>2</sup> There is no evidence any Virginia builders showed interest in the project. In fact, the records of Chowan County are woefully lacking in any documents detailing any plans, contracts, or accounts directly naming the undertakers who were charged with the responsibility of the construction.

The names of several individuals who performed work on Edenton’s Courthouse of 1767 are known. Hampton, Virginia, native, John Rombough, a joiner and cabinetmaker, made numerous repairs to Chowan County buildings in the late 1760s and early 1770s, especially to the county jail. However, records do not document his involvement in the initial construction of the new Courthouse. County records do document that house carpenters, Gilbert Leigh and John Green, performed work during its construction.<sup>3</sup> These two men are believed to have been the most prominent house carpenters and joiners in Chowan County during this period, and some believe they are the most likely candidates to have served as undertakers of Chowan County’s Courthouse of 1767.

The sparse records that do remain pertaining to the construction of the Courthouse document the work of Leigh and Green. In June 1768, the Court ordered Leigh to make "benches...near the courthouse table for the

convenience of the Attorneys and Great and Petit Juries”<sup>4</sup> This appears to signify that construction on the first-floor courtroom, an area of high priority, had been nearly completed.

Leigh and Green are both listed on an account dated September 20, 1770, although the date of the completion of the work before the date of the account is unknown. The two were paid £15.15.1 for work done in the Courthouse’s Clerk’s Office. This work included construction of a corner bookcase, £3.10.0, and a free-standing bookcase, £8.0.0 (Fig. 5, Corner bookcase by Leigh and Green) (Fig. 6, Free standing bookcase by Leigh and Green).



Figure 5





Figure 6

Several years ago, the free-standing bookcase was returned to the Courthouse and placed, based on ghost marks on the floor, plus other evidence, in its original location (See *Chowan County Courthouse Document or Book Press* ... on this website). They also were paid for 476 feet of one-inch plank and 180 feet of one and one-quarter inch plank, which probably indicates they were flooring the room. In October 1770, Leigh presented an account for Courthouse work including a brass lock, two cupboards, and two tables.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the few bills and accounts that survive pertaining to the construction of the Chowan County Courthouse of 1767 seem to center on Leigh and Green lends credence to the theory that they were at least major players in and probably the undertakers of the project.

If these two men, Gilbert Leigh and John Green, are the only known carpenters doing substantial work constructing the new Courthouse, is there any evidence to tie a J M to either of them? Records do document several of John Green's apprentices during these years. On January 28, 1767, the same year work began on the Courthouse, Green took Nehemiah Bateman as an apprentice to learn the house carpenter's trade. The next day, January 29, 1767, Green took Cornelius Leary, orphan of Cornelius Leary, as an apprentice to learn the same trade. Leary's two brothers, John and Job, apprenticed to Edenton cabinetmaker Samuel Black. Bateman and Cornelius Leary joined another more experienced apprentice already in Green's charge. On October 26, 1763, Green had taken John Mitchener,

J M, as an apprentice to learn the carpenter's trade. Mitchener was 14 at the time and was bound to Green until he was 21.<sup>6</sup>

Chowan County Tax Lists of the period place Mitchener in Green's household during his apprenticeship. Property records show Green owned and constructed houses on lots 28 and 29, old plan, located on the northwest corner of King and Oakum Streets in Edenton.<sup>7</sup> Although Green owned other property in and around Edenton, these lots appear to have been his, and therefore Mitchener's, residence. In 1765, Mitchener was listed in Green's household, along with Fredrick Norman, probably a journeyman carpenter. Mitchener and Norman remained in Green's household in 1766. Also present was Francis Dugan, probably another journeyman. In 1768, Mitchener and Dugan remained, now joined by John Brown and Samuel Jones. All these men undoubtedly worked on the new Courthouse. By the time the tax list was prepared in 1770, Mitchener had completed his apprenticeship and is listed as a single, separate resident of Edenton. That year Green's household consisted of Aurt Elberson, John Skees, John Derby, and Cut Leary, probably his apprentice Cornelius Leary.<sup>8</sup> So, although there was turnover in his household, Green maintained a substantial workforce to continue his work on the Courthouse.

Mitchener appears to have used a small gouge to create the initials on the fascia board and a sharp edge, perhaps of a chisel, to create the two 1771

dates (Fig. 7, Close-up of Mitchener's initials and date, 1771) (Fig. 8, Close-up of second date, 1771).



Figure 7



Figure 8



His primary reason for marking the cornice board with his initials probably was to identify his work product to Green. If he had still been an apprentice, he would have marked his work with the initials of his master, J G. The work of an apprentice is legally the work of the master and therefore not subject to compensation by the master. Mitchener's use of his own initials to identify his work product was consistent with his status as a journeyman. His initials signified to Green that he was entitled to compensation for that work. Inclusion of the date, 1771, is unusual but understandable considering Mitchener had completed his apprenticeship in 1770, probably only months before he produced this work.

Mitchener's choice of placement of the initials and dates on the board may signify a secondary purpose. They were placed on the upper edge of the front of the fascia board that supported the crown molding. While their placement ensured they would be fully hidden behind the crown molding, it would have been easier to place them randomly on the back of the board, if the sole purpose was to ensure payment for his work. A secondary purpose in placing his initials and the date 1771 in a location where it would be visible if only the crown molding were removed may have been youthful pride in his accomplishments both in producing the work as well as in earning his status as a free and independent craftsman after seven

years of training. Of course, he could have marked the fascia board after it was installed.

The Chowan County Tax List of 1772 does not list John Mitchener.<sup>9</sup> Tragically the young man had died. His inventory, taken April 21, 1772, sheds light on a young man recently freed after years as an apprentice and, for all too brief a period, able to earn and spend money acquired by an honest day's work in his chosen trade (Fig. 9, Inventory of John Mitchener).

At his death, Mitchener owned an impressive array of tools, in fact more than would be expected for a typical journeyman carpenter of the period. He had acquired thirty-three planes, twenty-one files, three rules, four pairs of compasses, twenty chisels, nine gouges, two hatchets, three squares, two adzes, seven saws, two saw sets, and a rounding knife. The chisels and gouges signify his intent to perform carving, while the thirty-three planes indicate he was capable of creating most any intricate molding a client might desire.

An Inventory of the Goods of John Mitchener  
Deceased April 21 1772

One Mare Bridle and Saddle

Brook 44" 8" 0

4 Coats 3 Jackets 3 Pairs of Breeches

4 Shirts 2 Hats 3 Pairs of Stockings

One Pair of <sup>Silver</sup> Shoe Buckles and Thence

One Gold Ring One Neck Cloth

One Pair of Silver Buttons

One Pair of Cloth Boots & Garters

One Pair of Shoes

Outstanding Debts Unsettled

One Note of hand of Hillsberry

on Derby Henry for £5" 6" 0

one Pocket Book

33 Blains 3 Pools 9 files & 2 Br compasses

19 Chisels 9 Gouges 2 Hatchets 3 Squares

2 Adzes One or four Blain Irons

7 Saws 12 files 2 Br compasses & 2 Sawsets

1 Pounding Knife and Chisel

Ballance an Accompt of Jackson £7" 15" 0

To W. Whitbee

4" 15"

Taken by me Will Badham

Figure 9

It is through the non-work related items in his inventory that we see how Mitchener chose to spend money he had earned after he had completed his apprenticeship in 1770. He owned no real property or furniture and undoubtedly rented living space in Edenton. He did own a mare, bridle, and saddle, valued at £14.8.0. His clothing consisted of four coats, three jackets, three pairs of breeches, four shirts, two hats, three pairs of stockings, a pair of cloth boots and garters, and one pair of shoes. To these essential possessions Mitchener did allow himself to splurge, as is so often the case with a young person's first taste of financial independence. He must have cut a dashing figure wearing his pair of silver shoe buckles, pair of silver buttons, gold ring, and neck cloth.<sup>10</sup>

Mitchener's purchases did leave his estate with some debt. He owed an outstanding debt to William Jackson of £7.15.0. Jackson was the former owner of a successful tannery and snuff and tobacco manufactory located on Broad and Queen streets at the present site of Edenton's current 1979 Courthouse. Jackson had died by October 1770, leaving an extensive estate. His November 26, 1770, estate sale coincided with Mitchener entering the world of a journeyman carpenter, and it might explain the debt. Jackson's estate did contain a box of carpenter's tools.<sup>11</sup> Mitchener's debt of £4.15.0 to Joseph Whedbee is more easily explained. Whedbee was young Mr. Mitchener's silversmith.



Mitchener appears to have been the son of Jeremiah Mitchener, who owned land north of Edenton in the area of Rocky Hock Creek. Jeremiah is listed as a planter in 1761 when he sold land to William Badham, to whom he was related by marriage.<sup>12</sup> Badham later inventoried John Mitchener's possessions.

Before his untimely death, John Mitchener was preparing himself for success in the trade taught him by his master, John Green. Within a short time of the end of his apprenticeship in 1770, he had invested in the numerous tools with which his business would thrive. Most of his newly earned money was spent on career, with a little left over for the extravagances of youth. One suspects that if he had not been lost at such an early age, John Mitchener's name could well have been remembered along with John Green and Gilbert Leigh as one of Edenton's master builders. We will never know as fate intervened. So, it is perhaps an appropriate irony that fate also had a hand in the chance discovery of his initialed and dated work product on Edenton's historic Courthouse of 1767. It is well that he will now be remembered.

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Figures 3, 7, and 8 are courtesy of Eric Ferguson.

Figure 4 is courtesy of Don Jordon.

Figure 9 is courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

## Endnotes

1. Marc D. Brodsky, *The Courthouse at Edenton*, Chowan County, Edenton, NC, 1989, pp. 14-16.
2. Ibid., pp. 26-27.
3. Ibid., pp. 22, 30, and 32.
4. Ibid., p. 30.
5. Ibid., p. 32.
6. John Bivins, Jr., *The Furniture of Coastal North Carolina 1700-1820*, Winston-Salem, NC, The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, 1988, p. 471.
7. Chowan County Deed Book N-1, p. 88.
8. Chowan County Tax List, 1765, 1766, 1768, and 1770, Loose Records, State Archives of North Carolina.
9. Ibid., Chowan County Tax List, 1772.
10. Chowan County Loose Estate Records, John Mitchener, State Archives of North Carolina.
11. Ibid., William Jackson.
12. Chowan County Deed Book K-1, p. 239.