

Common Chairs of Eastern North Carolina

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By

Tom Newbern and Jim Melchor

The Exhibition

Editor's note: For an enlarged view of figures, simply zoom in on your computer.

Common Chairs of Eastern North Carolina



William Hogarth, *A Harlot's Progress*, 1732

Ladderback chairs, termed "common chairs" in many Southern inventories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, are believed to have originated in Europe during the Middle Ages. They were in widespread use in Britain by the seventeenth century, and their use spread to the American colonies. Also called slat-back chairs, they were found in most every home of the period, whether in the entrance hall, on the front porch, or in the kitchen. Also, they were often used outside, perhaps leading to damage and offering one explanation why a number have had their legs cut down. Ladderback chairs are highly functional and easily moved to serve a variety of uses, both recreational and utilitarian. Based on their constant hard use, and misuse, very early Southern examples are rare, and most that exist today date to the nineteenth century. An example can be seen being put to use in William Hogarth's 2nd plate of "A Harlot's Progress".

Although often overlooked by modern collectors and considered by some to be simple examples of woodworking, common chairs are often highly developed both visually and structurally. Rural craftsmen formulated their own procedures for quickly and efficiently constructing common chairs for their family members and neighbors. Distinctive regional design elements developed, including turned finials, turnings for front legs and rear stiles, and general proportions. One feature that often distinguishes Southern examples is a round arm that extends over the front post rather than being mortised into the post. A structural sophistication sometimes found on regional chairs is known as "locked" stretchers, meaning the mortise for the side stretcher is drilled into the leg so that it cuts through a portion of the tenon of the already inserted front stretcher. This locks the front stretcher in place and prevents the chair from spreading apart during heavy use.



Northeast North Carolina Counties

This small study of common chairs looks at examples constructed in a number of northeastern North Carolina counties. They all reside in local private collections and range in date from 1725 to 1860. Distinctive turnings of finials, front legs, and rear stiles help point to their area of construction. Although obviously highly mobile pieces of furniture, years of study have identified multiple examples exhibiting related turnings that have recovery histories or have descended in families from the same locales, which also helps in pinpointing a point of origin. In some cases, evidence actually points to the craftsman, or family of craftsmen, believed responsible for their construction.



Hertford County Courthouse Chair, courtesy MESDA



1

CHOWAN-PERQUIMANS COUNTY

Dating to the second quarter of the 18th century, this chair is one of the earliest known North Carolina side chairs. It was recovered from a barn that contained other examples of early regional furniture located in northwestern Perquimans County near the Chowan County line. Its tall crest rail and split-balusters reflect the influence of New England examples shipped into our coastal region in the early years of the 18th century. Only one other North Carolina example is known. Its two-tier finials followed settlement patterns westward and are seen on later Roanoke River Basin examples.



2

CHOWAN COUNTY

After use as the town's library for a number of years during the 20th century, the Cupola House's first floor woodwork that was lost to the Brooklyn Museum was replicated and furnishings were acquired, many through local donations, to refurnish the house. Around 1980, earlier period furnishings were purchased and subsequently many of these donated items were deaccessed and sold, including this two-slat child's chair. The lower elements of its two-tier finials are fuller than usually found, but exactly match those found on a pair of related chairs that remain in the kitchen at Hayes plantation, located across Queen Anne's Creek from Edenton.



3

BERTIE COUNTY

This child's chair, which has always been called a "Rayner chair", descended in the family of Miles Rayner. Rayner was born on his family's north-central Bertie County plantation, where his father, Samuel Rayner, maintained a well-stocked cabinet shop. Three of Miles' brothers, Enoch, Elijah, and Joel, followed their father into woodworking trades, including chairmaking. This well-turned example is undoubtedly the product of one of these craftsmen. It displays an early coved version of typical double-ring turnings found on Bertie products and cone-shaped finials indicative of chairs found in northern Bertie County spreading northward into Hertford County.



4

BERTIE COUNTY

The double-ring turnings and two-tier finials found on this chair offer strong evidence of its Bertie County origins. Chairs like this example, with unusually tall seat heights, in this case 18 inches, were often called weaving chairs. This chair is unusual because either originally or early in life it was highlighted with a faux birdseye maple decorative finish, much of which remains to this day.



5

BERTIE COUNTY

One of three examples that spent forty years in the Richard Theater, an early vaudeville house and later movie theater in nearby Ahoskie, this chair descended in the family of the theater's builder, J.R. Garrett. His grandfather, Jesse Garrett, lived on a 1000-acre plantation in north-central Bertie County, and this chair may be one of "8 flag bottom chairs" purchased by his widow at his December 20, 1837, estate sale. His home, the Garrett-White house, still stands. This chair was likely made by one of his wife's uncles, cabinet and chairmakers Enoch and Elijah Rayner, who lived just west of the Garrett plantation. A matching example was recently found within a mile of the Garrett property.



6

BERTIE OR HERTFORD COUNTY

The decorative elements of this unusually stout armchair firmly relate it to the group of chairs made in the early 1830's for the rebuilt Hertford County Courthouse and for private sale to Winton area residents. However, this chair remained, for as long as can be remembered, on the waterside porch of Scotch Hall Plantation, located across the mouth of the Chowan River from Edenton in Bertie County. The craftsman believed responsible for this group, William Herring, disappeared from Hertford County records in 1835 and then may have traveled through Bertie County.



7

HERTFORD COUNTY

While rockers were sometimes added to common chairs, this example appears to have begun life in this form. There is no visible wear on the bottoms of the beveled legs, and the pegs securing both the upper slat and the rockers appear consistent and original. This child's rocker descended in the Jordon family of Winton on the Chowan River. It is one of a number of surviving examples by the craftsman who constructed seating for the new Hertford County Courthouse of 1832 after the prior courthouse was destroyed in August 1830. Forger Wright Allen set fire to the courthouse in a poorly conceived and vain attempt to destroy incriminating evidence against him he assumed was stored at the courthouse. The incriminating documents were actually stored at the Clerk's home in Murfreesboro.



8

HERTFORD COUNTY

The human proclivity to lean back while seated has broken or damaged many a sturdy chair, both in the 19th century and today. The maker of this chair responded by inserting diagonal side stretchers to disperse weight downward when leaning back. A matching chair displays a NC stamp on the back of a slat, signifying its use in the Hertford County Courthouse built in 1832 to replace the one destroyed by arson in 1830. This example also likely began its life in the courthouse. In fact, this unique design may have been the maker's ingenious response to previous damage to courthouse property.



9

HERTFORD COUNTY

Believed to date from the second half of the 18th century, this chair displays features that reveal its Hertford County origins. Its cone-shaped finials are often found on examples hailing from north-central Bertie County northward into Hertford County. The butt-joined vase turnings found on this chair's arm supports are found on a number of stretcher base tables with histories in Hertford County that date from the second quarter of the 18th century to around 1800.



10

HERTFORD COUNTY

This small child's rocker has features that relate it to chairs constructed in north-central Bertie County northward into Hertford County. Its cone-shaped finials figure prominently in this area and vase-like arm supports relate to those found on the Hertford County armchair in this exhibit. The upper slat is attached to the rear stiles with the same wrought sprigs that attach the rockers to the legs, not only hinting at the chair's 18th century date, but also that it began life as a rocker.



11

NORTHAMPTON COUNTY

This chair is one of a set of four purchased in the 1950's in an Ahoskie antique shop. Ahoskie is located in Hertford County, which adjoins the set's likely point of origin, Northampton County. Peaked slats are a strong indicator of Northampton work. Here the tops of the slats are flat as opposed to beveled or rounded, which may indicate a slightly later date of construction in the third quarter of the 19th century. Its finials evolved from early 19th century Northampton examples, a set of which is currently at Hope Plantation in Bertie County.



12

HALIFAX COUNTY

This child's chair, originally found in Halifax County, began life in its present state with rockers. The large round, barrel-shaped turnings on its rear stiles are a favored element found on Halifax County chairs, as are its bulbous finials. Its original rockers are secured to the front legs and to the rear legs with pegs, some now reinforced with early cut nails. Like numerous other Halifax examples, it is constructed of mulberry, including its rockers.



13

HALIFAX COUNTY

Although its legs were reduced in height in later years, most likely to create a young person's chair or for agricultural purposes, this chair is included in the exhibit for two purposes. First, it displays barrel-shaped turnings and bulbous finials indicative of chairs made in Halifax County, North Carolina. Second, it is constructed of mulberry. Mulberry is an open-grained wood that, when finished, resembles walnut, and perhaps its use indicates common chairs of a higher status. Halifax craftsmen seemed especially fond of this wood, and it is not commonly found on Virginia examples.



14

NASH COUNTY

The finials, upper front legs, and arms of this small child's chair identify it as the product of a Nash County chairmaker. Like chairs often served as the baby walkers of their day. They would be placed on their backs on the floor, allowing toddlers to stand behind the chair bottom and hold the chair for balance as they pushed the chair along the floor while learning to walk. Some wear shows on this example's front legs and arm ends, but its rear stiles are worn almost halfway through their thickness, exposing mortise joints. The current paint is a later addition.