

“God Feeds the Ravens”

Part II: Francis Corbin’s Bookplates and the Cupola House Carver

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

Francis Corbin's Bookplates

In Part One of this paper it was stated that there were two clues that could be used to identify the English Corbin line from which Francis descended and that the second involved bookplates from his library at the Cupola House. Corbin died July 29, 1767, and after extended legal wrangling, his possessions were sold at public vendue in Edenton on September 20, 1768. The sale was recorded room-by-room and the contents revealed that the Cupola House was lavishly furnished during Corbin’s ownership.⁹⁷ There were large quantities of elegant walnut and mahogany furniture, personal items that included “pictures,” a great deal of silver, dozens of pewter plates, fine china and Corbin’s large library of over sixty volumes that covered a subject range from the classics to history to philosophy, religion, literature, politics and the law.⁹⁸ One of the most prolific buyers at the sale was Samuel Johnston, a Revolutionary War leader, governor, U.S. senator, judge, attorney, and planter and son of the previously mentioned Samuel Johnston and his wife, Helen Scrymsoure.⁹⁹ Johnston was born in Dundee and came to North Carolina with his family sometime after March of 1735, where they resided in Onslow County until his father died in October 1757. Samuel attended Yale but did not complete his education there before

moving to Edenton in 1753 to read law under Thomas Barker. In 1765, Johnston purchased 543 acres across Queen Anne's Creek from Edenton and is believed to have built the substantial T-shaped house that appears on the 1769 Sauthier Map. Getting back to the Cupola House sale, the books purchased by Johnston included Peter Shaw's, *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, for which he paid £2.12, and a "parcel of French Books sold for £1.28." Stephen Weeks in his 1896 volume called *Libraries and Literature in North Carolina in the Eighteenth Century* identified many books that had been the property of men that were prominent in North Carolina's early history and noted that in a majority of cases the books still contained the bookplates of their first owners.¹⁰⁰ One of the men discussed by Weeks was James Cathcart Johnston, who built a home near Edenton called Hayes. James Cathcart was the son of Samuel Johnston, and his new home replaced the earlier circa 1765 house built by his father on that site. The house at Hayes was designed and built between 1814 and 1817 by English architect William Nichols, who later became the state architect of North Carolina. Its library contained nearly 1,800 volumes, with imprints dating from the late 1500s to the 1860s. Importantly, Weeks noted that the Hayes library contained several books that had belonged to Francis Corbin. In more recent years, John Gilliam Wood, who owned Hayes, presented the contents of the library to the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where they reside today. An investigation revealed that indeed at least two of the Francis Corbin books were in the collection at Chapel Hill and contained their original

bookplates.¹⁰¹ They were Shaw's book on the philosophical works of Francis Bacon, printed in London in 1733, and a book by Francois Fenelon called *Les aventures de Telemarque*, printed in London in 1742. The former book was purchased by Samuel Johnston at the Cupola House sale, and the latter was very probably among the volumes contained in the "parcel of French Books," also purchased by him. One of the original Francis Corbin bookplates containing elements from his coat of arms is shown in Figure 4.

Notice that Corbin styles himself "Esq." by which designation he likely meant to convey that he was a gentleman and descended from the landed gentry. The motto shown is "Deus pascit corvos," which is Latin for "God feeds the ravens." Elvin in his book on mottoes states that this one was used by a number of English armorial families, including Corbin and Corbyn.¹⁰² In heraldry, the color of the shield is termed the field when it consists of a single color, and when it consists of more than one color, the two together comprise the field.¹⁰³ The field is usually of one or more recognized heraldic metals, colors or furs. One of the original furs was known as Ermine and in its basic form is of white covered with black spots intended to represent the tails of the animals.¹⁰⁴



Figure 4. *Francis Corbin's bookplate showing coat of arms.*

It may be of some interest that the three ravens shown on Francis Corbin's bookplates appear to be standing on an ermine field. However,

a more compelling interpretation is suggested by information from the American College of Heraldry regarding the black and white rendering of armorial bearings with various types of diagonal lines or dots.¹⁰⁵ According to information there, the spots where the ravens are standing indicate that the color there is gold, with silver on the shield below. These are the colors of the Corbins of Corbin Hall/Hall End, which reads “argent [silver] on a chief or [on a chief, gold], three ravens”. The crest used by Corbin shows a “stag at gaze,” meaning an intent look, often said of a deer standing still and turning its head to look earnestly at any object.¹⁰⁶ The three ravens clearly link the Francis Corbin bookplates to the coat of arms of the Corbin Hall and Hall End lines and offer further evidence of his family ties to his “near relation,” Corbyn Morris.

While little is truly unique in the study of Southern furniture, the indented, blade-like rear talons found on the feet of the "8 Arm Mahogany Chairs" constructed by Samuel Black for Francis Corbin's dining room at the Cupola House may be worthy of the title. While the form and shaping of the indented, blade-like rear talons found on Mr. Corbin's armchairs are in and of themselves very unusual, it is the method of their construction that separates them from other known rear talons and makes them essentially a construction signature of their maker, Samuel Black. The time and therefore expense invested to remove stock from the rear of each of the armchairs' balls to emphasize the indented, blade-like rear talons, the same method employed to create

the blade-like rear talons found on the piecrust, round tea table that is likely a member of this same set, points to the paying patron, Francis Corbin, as the probable source of their inclusion.

Yet, a question still remains. What was the source of the design of these blade-like rear talons, and what was their significance to Francis Corbin, the patron who bore the expense of their creation? Very little of the design of the Cupola House seems to have been left to chance, including evidence that Corbin acquired the services of a talented carver and cabinetmaker to enact his vision, probably by prearranged agreement and perhaps through the efforts of his "near relation" Corbyn Morris, who was serving as Secretary of the Customs in Scotland at the exact time the Cupola House was being planned and constructed.

This same attention to detail was also applied to the creation of the blade-like rear talons found on the eight armchairs and the piecrust, round tea table. Since the rear talons of the armchairs were first discussed in detail over 30 years ago in John Bivins' seminal work, *The Furniture of Coastal North Carolina 1700-1820*, a satisfactory explanation of their design source and meaning has not been forthcoming. In fact, no proposed theory has even come close to explaining why their maker would commit the extra time, and therefore expense, to their creation or why a patron would assume the extra expense required for their construction.

The recent examination detailed earlier in this article of Francis Corbin's links to the greater Corbin family of Corbin Hall and his continued use of the family symbol, three ravens, on his elaborate bookplates, may for the first time offer a plausible explanation for the creation of these prominent indented, blade-like rear talons on the armchairs as well as for the expense incurred to create the blade-like rear talons on the piecrust, round tea table, considering that they could not be seen unless the viewer was lying prone on the floor. The design source for these blade-like rear talons may well be the ravens found on Francis Corbin's elaborate bookplates. This symbol of the extended Corbin family was used for generations and was important enough to Francis Corbin for him to continue the raven's use in Edenton through these bookplates. It is difficult to dismiss as happenstance that by creating the armchairs' ball-and-claw feet with the outer upper knuckles pushed towards the center line of the foot, and with the large and prominent indented blade-like rear talons, Samuel Black also created feet with a very strong resemblance to the feet of a raven, the Corbin family symbol displayed on his patron's bookplates (Fig. 5).

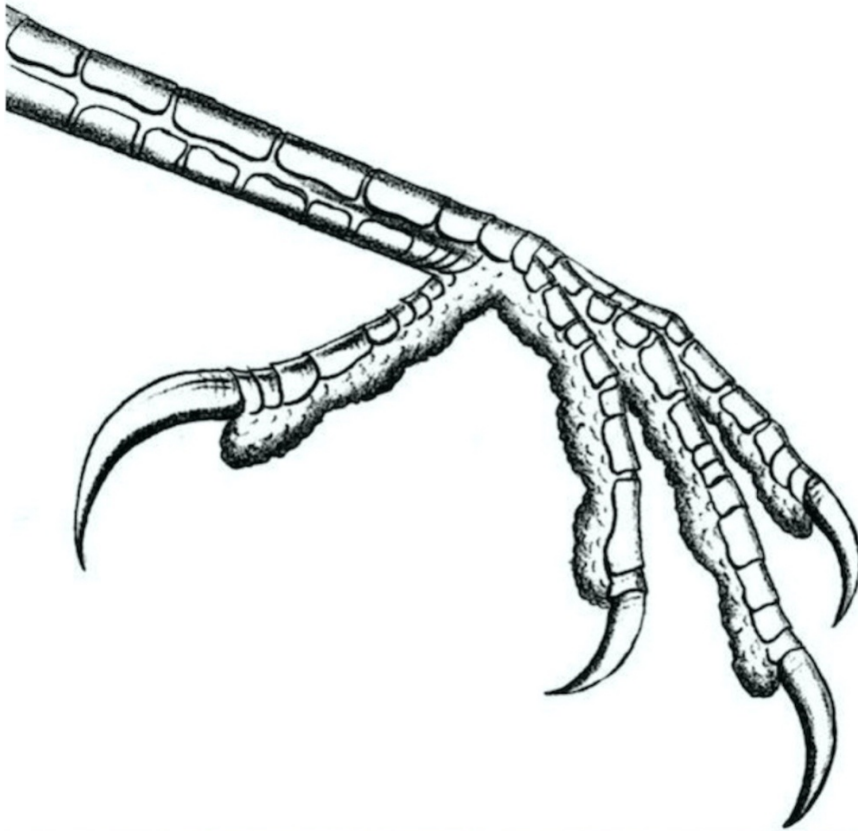


Figure 5. *Foot of a raven superimposed on a foot of an armchair made by Samuel Black for Francis Corbin.*

When one considers other details found on Francis Corbin's bookplates, such as the straight-line markings found on the field where the ravens are standing, representing the color gold, and the straight-line stippling indicative of Black's work, rather than the more common random stippling, the likelihood of the influence of Corbin's bookplates on Black's carving increases (Fig. 6) (Fig. 7). This idea will be explored in greater detail in a future article on the website.



Figure 6. *Detail of Francis Corbin bookplate.*



Figure 7. *Straight line stippling on Samuel Black writing table.*
Courtesy of MESDA.

Endnotes:

[97] Cheeseman, Bruce S. Historical Research Report, The Cupola House of Edenton, Chowan County, vol. 1 (text), Raleigh, NC, April 1980, p. 71.

[98] Ibid., p. 72.

[99] Blair, Anna Withers. NCpedia entry for Samuel Johnston (December 15, 1733-August 17, 1816). Available online at: <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/johnston-samuel>.

[100] Weeks, Stephen B. *Libraries and Literature in North Carolina in the Eighteenth Century*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1896, pp. 202, 204, 210.

[101] NCpedia entry for Hayes Library. Available online at:
<https://www.ncpedia.org/media/hayes-library-wide-view>.

[102] Francis Bacon, *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon* (London: 1733) and Francois Fenelon, *Les aventures de Telemarque* (London: 1742), North Carolina Rare Book Collection, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[103] Elvin, C.N. *A Hand-Book of Mottoes borne by the Nobility, Gentry, Cities, Public Companies, &c.* London: Bell and Daldy, 186 Fleet Street, 1860, p. 43.

[104] Fox-Davies, Arthur Charles. *A Complete Guide to Heraldry*. London: T. C. & E. C. Jack, Ltd., 35 & 36 Paternoster Row, 1925, pp. 77-78.

[105] American College of Heraldry FAQs page. Available online at
<http://www.americancollegeofheraldry.org/achreply.html>.

[106] Fox-Davies, p. 208