

Major John Dunlap: The Craftsman and his Community

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The account book of Major John Dunlap (1746-92), cabinetmaker, house joiner, and farmer of Goffstown and Bedford, New Hampshire, is an important source for interpreting the social and economic roles of a craftsman/husbandman in a rural farming community during the last half of the eighteenth century.¹ Though Dunlap's accounts were kept as records of his woodworking enterprise, they also mention crops and farm work. Since most of the accounts were settled by an exchange of labor or commodities, they disclose much about the agricultural practices of Dunlap and his neighbors in addition to aspects of the cabinetmaker's business.

The entries, dating from 1768 to 1789, give insight into the diversity of Dunlap's skills, the employment patterns of men working for him or on neighboring farms, and the patterns of trade in this agricultural region on the Merrimack River.² In this study the Dunlap account book entries are analyzed to determine with whom he traded; the services or commodities exchanged; the geographical distribution of his customers; and his economic dependence upon neighboring farmers, craftsmen, and storekeepers. This article also considers the amount of time Major John and his employees devoted to cabinetmaking or agriculture. Sales of furniture and days spent framing houses suggest seasonal cycles in shop production and related work. Extended periods of inactivity in the shop indicate the time of year when husbandry probably had top priority.

Major John Dunlap was the third of five sons of Archibald (1713-54), who was born

in Ireland of Scots ancestry. The date of Archibald's arrival in New Hampshire is unknown, but by 1741 he owned land, a house, and some livestock in Chester.³ Major John and all of his brothers were farmers with additional skills as joiners, cabinetmakers, or chairmakers or with economic interests in lumbering.⁴ All of the brothers except Joseph, the eldest, are mentioned in Major John's accounts. The exchanges of goods and labor recorded in these accounts reflect Major John's tight familial and economic relationships. Entries credit his brothers for meat, grain, their work on the farm or in the shop, and their joinery products.

Probably already trained as a cabinetmaker, Major John moved to Shirley Hill in Goffstown in the late 1760s. It is not known whether he moved directly from Chester or had lived elsewhere in the interim to acquire cabinetmaking skills.⁵ However, as early as 1769 Major John was selling furniture to Job Dow, a sawmill owner in Goffstown, with whom he carried an active trade. Two years later he held a vendue (auction) at Shirley Hill where he sold ninety-six pieces of furniture.⁶

The rapidly growing Goffstown-Bedford area provided a ready market for Dunlap's furniture and house-joinery. Farming and lumbering were the most prevalent liveli-

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FIG. 1. DETAIL FROM "THE STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE, COMPILED CHIEFLY FROM ACTUAL SURVEYS, 1810." Engraved for the *New Encyclopaedia*. (SPNEA Archives.)

hoods, and the banks of the Merrimack were active with trapping, fishing, saw and grist mills, forges, and tanneries. Goffstown's population of 831 in 1775 increased to 1,275 by 1790, and Bedford's population almost doubled, rising from 495 to 898 during the same period. Only four cabinetmakers or joiners are known to have worked in Goffstown prior to 1825, but ten worked in Bedford during this time.⁷ Though smaller in population, Bedford was growing at a faster rate than Goffstown and probably offered more opportunities for cabinetmakers and house-joiners. Major John's accounts suggest that Goffstown residents often looked to Bedford for these services.

Major John built a house in Goffstown, and in 1777 he moved it to Bedford to the one-hundred acres he had purchased in

1775. The accounts covering this period itemize expenses for clearing land, moving the house, and building the barn. They reveal that Major John paid twenty-seven neighbors to chop and to clear his land in May, 1776.⁸ Building was begun in the summer of 1777, when many entries appear for hauling boards from the sawmills in Goffstown. Men and oxen were still employed for digging the cellar into the fall. The move was recorded in the *History of Antrim*:

He first settled on what is now called Shirley Hill in Goffstown . . . [and] built a large, square two-story house . . . He then bought another tract of land a mile below in the northern part of Bedford. The great house was taken down, each piece marked, carried to the new location, and put up with such care that there was only part of one clapboard missing.⁹

In 1777 Dunlap began paying his taxes to the town of Bedford.¹⁰

Dunlap married Martha Gilmore (? - 1812), with whom he had seven children between 1772 and 1784.¹¹ Major John's accounts show that his wife's family were farmers who traded him corn, beans, rye, potatoes, oats, flax, and pigs. His brother-in-law, Whitefield, and his father-in-law, James, sold him maple, other commercial lumber, and nails; in return, Major John sold them furniture and rakes. He laid a floor for Whitefield, and his accounts note reaping and mowing for James.

William and Samuel Dunlap, Major John's brothers, went to Goffstown to work with and be trained by Major John, who was well-established as a cabinetmaker and joiner.¹² He employed them to work both in his shop and on his farm. William Dunlap (1750- ?) was listed as a yeoman in court records, but he was also a chairmaker, cabinetmaker, joiner, and tanner. In addition to bottoming chairs and building barns, he sold Major John rye, beans, and pork. Major John's accounts credit him for reaping and clearing, and in return he received vats and green hides for his tanning business.

Samuel Dunlap (1752-1830) worked for Major John in the late winter or early spring of 1773, 1774, and 1775; he was probably hired to finish pieces of furniture in the shop or to prepare the land for planting. The entries for Samuel show that he was also a cabinetmaker and joiner. Major John paid him for making a chest of drawers, and Samuel bought tools, hardware, logwood, glue, and beeswax from his brother.¹³

A maximum of seven men were employed by Major John at one time; a total of fifteen men are known to have worked for him at different times between 1773 and 1786.¹⁴ Three males over sixteen were listed in his household in 1790. Since his sons were younger than sixteen, these



FIG. 2. HIGH CHEST OF DRAWERS attributed to Major John Dunlap, c. 1780. Maple; H. 83½ in., W. 40½ in., D. 20 in. (1944.14: Photograph courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society.)

three must have been apprentices or laborers living in his home.¹⁵ Dunlap's apprentices and workmen did a variety of chores on the farm and in the shop. References to work done by Samuel Remick and William Houston, for example, are numerous in the accounts and show the diversity of their tasks. Remick worked for Dunlap from 1773 until 1782, and the entries show a marked increase in the amount of wood-working he did in his later years in Dunlap's service. Besides laying floors, bottoming chairs, putting up boarding, and making

bedsteads, Remick performed chores like reaping, chopping, and picking rocks from fields. William Houston was one of four young men whom Major John took on as apprentices.¹⁶ Houston, listed as "laborer" in his indenture of two years dated 1775, is cited in the accounts as doing general joinery as well as reaping, chopping, and mowing.¹⁷

The accounts establish that all of the activities usually associated with farming were performed on Major John's land. There are general entries for plowing, harrowing, and hoeing, and specific mention of cultivating flax, rye, wheat, and potatoes. Often Dunlap would hire extra hands to work three months in the spring when farm work was most demanding.¹⁸ Most frequently, though, he employed neighbors on a daily basis to work on specific projects.¹⁹ They were hired for farm chores and land improvements like clearing or building fences. In 1777 when Dunlap was moving his house, there was a marked increase in the hiring of day laborers for these jobs. It can be assumed that since his regular workmen were better employed with their joining skills, outside aid was sought to do the seasonal agricultural work.

Theories of farming practices in the Bedford area can be formulated from the accounts. Major John's transactions include trading his services for a variety of grains and vegetables. Dunlap often hired out his apprentices and laborers to do farm chores for others, but it is noteworthy that Dunlap's name is never cited for doing such work on his or his neighbors' farms. Surviving manuscripts do not identify what was planted on his one-hundred acres, but he did hire men to dig and haul potatoes and swingle flax. Various purchases of farm implements and the number of these tools in his estate inventory reveal that he ran an active farm.²⁰

Corn, the most frequently mentioned crop in Dunlap's accounts, was obtained by exchange from twenty different people. Half of the entries for receiving corn are undated, making it impossible to determine whether Dunlap purchased a specific amount annually. Only ninety-one bushels of corn are listed in the accounts between 1773 and 1784. This amount would have been insufficient for Dunlap, his family, and workmen to live on, although all of the corn received might not have been recorded. Since corn was the chief crop of the region, Dunlap probably planted some on his own land, though his accounts do not mention it specifically. Two accounts explicitly give corn rather than a monetary equivalent for Dunlap's services, suggesting the problems of securing hard cash in the revolutionary and early Federal periods. In 1778 William Rogers owed "for painting Two Rooms, three Bushels of Corn or the price of it," and in 1782 James Patterson was indebted for "one desk, twenty Seven Bushels of Corn or the Vealue thairof in fish or Eals or money."²¹

Rye was traded less frequently than corn. Dunlap recorded twelve sources, most of whom also provided him with corn. Major John either planted a substantial amount of rye or stockpiled it, for he sold twenty-one bushels in 1781 for distribution to six men, and in 1782 he loaned out twenty-one bushels to eleven neighbors and sold another six and one-half bushels to two others.

Dunlap was probably self-sufficient in meat since there are only four references to his purchasing meat, and two of the suppliers were his brothers. Entries were made for buying sows and pigs, and in 1792 his estate included twelve cows, a yoke of oxen, two horses, thirteen sheep, and three swine. The oxen were probably acquired in 1782, when the accounts first mention his owning and leasing them to others. Pre-

viously he had rented them for hauling heavy materials needed for house-joinery and masonry.

Major John depended upon storekeepers Robert McGregore and Kelley for imported commodities and foodstuffs.²² In the spring, summer, and fall when laborers were employed for farming or building, rum was purchased constantly from stores or taverns. The storekeepers also supplied him with items needed in his shop like brasses, locks, and logwood.²³ Dunlap bought some of these items in quantities sufficient to supply his own cabinetmaking needs and to resell separately to various customers. He also bought nails and brads in large quantities, usually one- to four-thousand, for his own use and for resale.²⁴ Hinges were bought from the local blacksmith, Mathew Kennedy.

Despite the many references to the exchange of farm produce and labor, most of Dunlap's accounts deal with purchases he made to stock his shop with lumber. Twenty-seven different men supplied him with boards between 1770 and 1785; eight were major suppliers, each of whom sold him over 1,250 feet of timber. Four of these eight, Job Dow, Asa Pattee, Samuel Ridle, and Jacob Stevens, were saw-mill owners who traded milled lumber for furniture. Three of the remaining four large suppliers, Amos Every, Whitefield Gilmore, and Samuel McFarland, received framing or farming work in payment, not furniture. From this the supposition can be drawn that only the wealthier mill owners or farmers were inclined, or perhaps could afford, to buy Dunlap's furniture. Until 1776 most of the lumber was purchased in Goffstown where Dow, Pattee, and Moses Little had mills. After Dunlap moved to Bedford, he shifted his business to local mills, especially to Ridle's. However, he did continue to patronize some Goffstown mills, like that of Jacob Stevens of Piscataquag in Goffstown.

The types of wood mentioned in the accounts are found in pieces of furniture attributed to the Dunlap shop. Maple was six times more prevalent in the accounts than cherry, and furniture attributed to Major John is almost always maple. Cherry is noted in the accounts for tea tables. Birch was probably available since at least one desk made of birch can be assigned to Dunlap's shop (Fig. 3), although this wood is not mentioned in the accounts.

Records list John Dunlap as a cabinet-maker and house joiner, but he also functioned as a turner, glazier, painter, wagonwright, and undertaker. He made an assortment of functional items for local industry: brick molds, tan vats, pulley blocks, and potash vats. For domestic use he made spinning and weaving implements, bread troughs, and bread shovels. Dunlap and his workmen built carts and sleighs and numerous hand tools of all sorts. He sold 151 rakes between 1773 and 1785, some of which were resold in stores as far away as Amherst, New Hampshire. His many skills extended to glueing fiddles and making drumsticks and fifes.

Dunlap's accounts show that the work in his shop followed a seasonal cycle. Most of the furniture was made during the winter months, December through March. Shop productivity dropped sharply in April and was not counter-balanced by a surge in house-joinery. During this time, Dunlap and his employees were probably occupied preparing the fields, though this remains speculative since no entries identify specific activities during this month. In May house-joinery began, and notations in the accounts reflect increased shop production. Most large building projects, which continued for a month or more, were begun at this time. Shop work was almost at a standstill in June; only easily assembled tables and chairs were sold. Continued good weather at this time of year may have dictated that house-joining have top prior-



FIG. 3. DESK attributed to Major John Dunlap. Found in Goffstown. Birch; H. $45\frac{3}{8}$ in., W. 38 in., D. $19\frac{3}{4}$ in. (1962.15: Photograph courtesy of the Currier Gallery of Art.)

ity. Most pieces of furniture from the shop were sold in July, and the large building projects were continued.

July and August were busy months on the farm with mowing and reaping, which is supported by notations showing work done by Dunlap's laborers in the fields of neighbors. The expectation of crops soon to be harvested may have enabled farmers to purchase Dunlap's products more easily in these summer months. In September there were sales of simple furniture forms like tables and chairs, since Dunlap was chiefly occupied with house-joinery. Few entries were made in October, but Dunlap's

time seems to have been divided between shop work and house building. Since the sale of furniture was not increased in November, Dunlap probably was not actively working in his shop, but merely trading furniture made previously for services or for recently harvested crops. There is a notable increase in shop work in December when case pieces like desks and chests of drawers were made. December, with its snowfalls, was the month for hauling lumber and, one supposes, for settling into the shop for the winter months.

John Dunlap's trade was not limited to Goffstown and Bedford; he had customers

Table 1. Frequency by Month of Furniture Forms Produced in Major John Dunlap's Shop. From his Account Book, 1769-86.

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Total
Desks and Chests	11	7	17	2	4	5	8	4	1	5	0	7	71
Percent of total	15%	10	24	3	6	7	11	6	1	7	0	10	100%
Tables	10	6	9	2	2	2	7	1	3	1	1	4	48
Percent of total	21%	13	19	4	4	4	15	2	6	2	2	8	100%
Chairs	78	48	59	38	30	37	52	10	11	4	3	34	404
Percent of total	19%	12	15	9	7	9	13	2	3	1	1	8	99%*
Combined percentage	18.3%	11.7	19.3	5.3	5.7	7.6	13	3.3	3.3	3.3	1	8.7	100%

*rounding error

within a twenty-mile radius of his home. Many of the towns in which he traded were on the Merrimack River (Merrimack, Litchfield, Londonderry) and were accessible by water. However, no definite geographical patterns or trade routes can be established from the available evidence. He sold furniture, built houses and meetinghouse pulpits, and bought store supplies in a number of communities, including Derry, Temple, Londonderry, Merrimack, Amherst, New Boston, Dunbarton, and Dearing.

Major John did not seem to be dependent upon any urban center for supplies, yet the accounts mention a few trips to Boston. However, little stylistic correlation between his furniture and furniture made by Boston cabinetmakers can be made. There is little other evidence of goods from Boston except for books purchased or traded there. John paid his brother Samuel one dollar in 1774 for going to Cambridge, and the family still possess books which were purchased by John while he was in Boston in 1777. He died in 1792 in Billerica, en route from Boston.²⁵

Since Dunlap's accounts are primarily records of his shop production and house joinery, care has been taken in interpreting

his role as a husbandman. Dunlap's entries, however, give solid evidence that he was a skilled craftsman whose life and work was ruled by the demands of an agricultural community. He owned land, employed men to work his farm, bought tools and livestock, and sold surplus crops. His involvement in farming was increased by his hiring out employees and oxen to work lands of neighbors and by his supplying the community with rakes and other implements. Dunlap's work in the shop or building houses depended on the weather and the seasonal demands of the farm, as has been noted in his monthly productivity. His joinery was often compensated with farm produce, but more often with lumber used in the shop or in house-building. His farm was not self-sufficient to feed his family and hired help, and he relied upon others for additional food. Storekeepers supplied him with imported items, rum, fabrics, and hardware and finishing materials for cabinetmaking. Finally, Dunlap supplied his own skills as a joiner in a number of ways for all sorts of people, thereby completing a complex network of economic exchanges in Bedford, Goffstown, and along the Merrimack River.

NOTES

¹ Major John Dunlap's account book is published in *The Dunlaps and Their Furniture* (Manchester, N.H.: The Currier Gallery of Art, 1970), a valuable study by Charles S. Parsons which emphasizes Major John's role as a cabinetmaker and house-joiner. The study includes exhaustive historical and genealogical data on the Dunlaps and provides much background material for which I am indebted to Mr. Parsons. The accounts have noticeable gaps and sporadic entries in the years 1768 to 1771 which can be identified by accounts listed in a ciphering book, time book, pocket book, and in individual receipts

which are unpublished and still in the possession of the family.

² The accounts provide an enlightening comparison with the diary of Matthew Patten (1719-1795), also of Bedford, who was a woodworker as well as a farmer, justice of the peace, judge of probate, and surveyor. The diary spans the period 1754 to 1788 and reveals Patten's diverse activities which ranged from building furniture and carts to coopering and to framing barns and turning bowls. See Matthew Patten, *Diary of Matthew Patten of Bedford, New Hampshire, 1754-1788* (Concord, N.H.: Rumford, 1903).

³ Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴ Joseph (1742-1804), the eldest of the Dunlap brothers, was probably the first to move the eighteen miles from Chester to Goffstown, and he surely encouraged his younger brother to follow. Listed as a farmer in court records, Joseph built a home on Kennedy Hill in Goffstown. Little is known about James (1744-1803), also a farmer, who was the only brother to remain in Chester. He traded with Major John in Bedford and did some joinery for him. The other brothers, William and Samuel, worked with Major John and are discussed in the text.

⁵ Chester had three cabinetmakers, Daniel Hodgkins, Moses Marshall, and Wilkes West, in the mid-eighteenth century, but their influence on the Dunlap school is unidentifiable. See Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5, note 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹ Warren R. Cochrane, *History of the Town of Antrim, New Hampshire, from Its Earliest Settlement to June 27, 1877* (Manchester, N.H.: Published by the Town, 1922), p. 478.

¹⁰ Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹¹ George P. Hadley, *History of the Town of Goffstown, 1733-1920*, 2 vols. (Concord, N.H.: Published by the Town, 1922), vol. 2, p. 132.

¹² When they first arrived, each probably lived with Major John and his wife, though the entry for William's board in 1773 is the only reference to the brothers' living together.

¹³ Neither Samuel nor William remained in Goffstown, possibly owing to the competition of John's business. William moved to Schenectady, N.Y.; Samuel moved to Henniker in 1779 and to Salisbury in 1797.

¹⁴ Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁶ Other apprentices were: David Stone, appren-

ticed for five years in 1785; John Holms for two years in 1790; and Matthew Miller for three years, five months in 1791.

¹⁷ Employees and their working dates not cited in the text are: Samuel Gregg, 1775-84; William Karr, April-December, 1784; Thomas McDole and Robert McKeen, October, 1784; John Pratt, May, 1785-March, 1786; Robert Hemphill, eight days in 1786. Alexander Parker and Jacob Jones are listed in Dunlap's time book.

¹⁸ Nathaniel Spoford worked from July through September in 1782, and Alexander McDole was hired for four months after 23 April 1783.

¹⁹ Neighbors who helped Dunlap on his farm were: Philip Ferren, Samuel Torrel, Samuel Moreson, Patrick Larken, and Robert Speer.

²⁰ Listed in Major John's estate inventory are: a plow and hoe, cart and tackling, chains, hay and dung fork, oak yoke and tackling, and harrow teeth. He bought harrow teeth from James Marten who also made a nose for the harrow. Nathaniel Shad provided Dunlap with two scythes and an ax. James Wallace was credited for making a plow.

²¹ Parsons, *op. cit.*, pp. 175, 262.

²² The accounts show that Dunlap purchased chintz, taffeta, serge, linen, buckram, black cloth, ribbon, molasses, sugar, dishes, salt, paper, books, and tools from the stores.

²³ Logwood, used to stain wood to resemble mahogany, and Spanish brown, a reddish-brown earthen compound used as a pigment, were bought from Daniel Moore and John Rand, and Mathew Little and Jean Kennedy, respectively. Chaff, probably used as an abrasive, was also purchased by Major John.

²⁴ Dunlap received nails and brads from Robert Wilson, John Bell, John Eaton, Mr. Kelley, Samuel McFarland, Moses Little, Whitefield Gilmore, and Amos Gardner.

²⁵ Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 6.