

# The Booth Family of Newtown and Southbury, Connecticut

By ETHEL HALL BJERKOE

SINCE there has never been any published data on the three cabinet-makers with the name Booth, it is important to register them in their proper places within the Booth family, one of the prominent families of Connecticut, particularly in early Stratford.

Richard Booth was one of the early settlers of Stratford. His grandson, Ebenezer, born there March 11, 1685, migrated to Newtown, where he died Feb. 11, 1726/27. His son, also named Ebenezer, was born at Newtown, April 1, 1718; married Rachel Sanford, Newtown, Dec. 5, 1739; and died Jan. 7, 1803. It is not known whether he was a cabinetmaker but two of his sons—his third child, Ebenezer, and fourth, Elijah—were both cabinetmakers, as was his grandson (Ebenezer's son) Joel. (D. L. Jacobus, *Genealogy of the Booth Family*, published by Eden C. Booth, Pleasant Hill, Mo., 1952; *Vital Statistics*, Connecticut State Library, Hartford.)

BOOTH, Ebenezer, *Newtown, Conn.*

Ebenezer was born at Newtown, Aug. 16, 1743. He married Olive Sanford of Woodbury (daughter of Jonathan and Phebe [Platt] Sanford), Nov. 20, 1766. As yet no piece of furniture has been directly attributed to him but it is reasonable to believe that furniture made by

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him would have many features in common with that made by Elijah and by Joel. It is not known with whom they learned their trade. It would seem probable that Ebenezer and his brother Elijah were apprenticed to the same cabinet-maker and that Joel learned his trade from his father. Ebenezer died in 1790. His will, dated March 14, 1789, and proved July 5, 1790, left his son Joel "two-thirds of the property and the Joiner's Shop." In addition, "I give & bequeath to my son Joel Booth forty shillings to be paid out of my Joyner tools in consideration of his being my eldest son." The inventory of Ebenezer's estate showed considerable lumber and furniture in the shop; among other things it listed:

202 chair parts      154 Do round  
1 Stole, 1 Desk & Drawers  
1 Chest and Draws  
one round fall table  
one large Do  
8 plain Chairs

6 round top chairs  
5 fiddle backs  
1 plain Chest

150 feet Chery bords, 400 feet of oak bord  
800 feet Whitewood Do, 340 feet pine  
350 feet Maple, 464 feet white pine  
100½ of Birch do

The inventory also contained a great many tools—chisels, gouges, planes, "one set of patterns," chest locks, etc.

BOOTH, Elijah, *Southbury, Conn.*

Elijah was born at Newtown, Oct. 26, 1745. On Oct. 14, 1772, he married Anna Hinman, daughter of Deacon

Noah Hinman of Southbury (part of Woodbury at that time) and they were the parents of eight children. Anna died April 15, 1804, and Elijah married Anna Deming, Oct. 23, 1805.

Elijah was in Southbury as early as 1770, when he bought property from Noah Dudley in the parish of Roxbury. Over the years Booth did a great deal of buying and deeded the same property over and over again, the deed given as security for a loan, upon payment of which the deed was invalidated.

In 1771 he bought a plot of ground from Edward Hinman (*Woodbury Land Records*, Vol. 18, p. 75), and that was the land upon which were his dwelling house and cabinetmaking shop. The deed reads in part: "In Consideration of One Hundred and twenty-three Pound, Twelve Shillings, Lawfull money in hand Recd. of Elijah Booth of Woodbury . . . one Certain Tract of Land lying in said Woodbury, in the Parish of Southbury, being one half acre at the North west corner of the said Edward Hinman Home Lot, and described as follows: Beginning at the northwest corner where the two highways or streets meet, thence East by highway 10 rods to a heap of stone, then South 8 rods to a heap of stone, westward 10 rods to a heap of stones by the street, North by the street 8 rods to first mentioned bounds. Contains one-half acre more or less with a dwellinghouse standing thereon and a well dug thereon." Elijah died Sept. 24, 1823, at the age of seventy-eight, and it is apparent that he was not well enough to carry on his cabinetmaking work for some years prior to his death. On March 15, 1806, he sold to Eli Hall (*Woodbury Land Records*, Vol. 4, p. 193) for 160 pounds "Lawfull money . . . A certain piece of land lying in Southbury con-

taining about half an acre of Land with a Dwelling House, a *Joiner's Shop* [author's italics] and a Barn thereon." This was the property he had bought from Edward Hinman in 1771, where he and his family had lived and where he had carried on his work, but between the time of its purchase in 1771 and its sale in 1806 a joiner's shop had been added and the value had gone up from 123 pounds to 160 pounds. It is possible that any joiner's tools owned by Elijah were included in the sale because the inventory of his estate, Oct. 20, 1823, revealed few possessions and no tools. There were several pieces of furniture: 1 cherry stand, 1 chest with drawers, 1 chest, 1 candlestand, 1 bedstead, 4 chairs, a "Winsor" chair, 1 case "Draws," 8 kitchen chairs. All of this was left to his second wife. However, shortly before his death there had been deeds conveying several pieces of property to various members of the family, and since at the time of the signing of his will he was apparently unable to write his name, it is evident that he was very ill and had been trying to get his affairs in order.

Many pieces of furniture owned by families living in and near Southbury are attributed to Elijah Booth's cabinetmaking shop by very definite tradition. His memory is kept alive in the minds of many still living in Southbury. They say he employed several apprentices, that he bought tracts of timber, which he cut down and used for his furniture, much of which is made of native cherry wood. Pieces attributed to him indicate that he was a well-trained cabinetmaker, working in a style some years earlier than that in vogue elsewhere, but this was often true in the case of workmen at a distance from the larger cities.

Elijah made tables, highboys, lowboys,

secretaries, desks, chairs, and chests-on-chest, all in the Chippendale style. Almost as good as a signature is the beading along the edge of cabriole legs, high or low. Unlike the beading used by the Rhode Island men, which ends in a curl, that used by Booth ends in a simple dart. With his short cabriole leg he used a claw-and-ball foot, the claw firmly grasping the ball; or his version of a Spanish foot. On highboys, the front legs generally have claw-and-ball feet; the rear legs, pad feet. Again all four legs may have pad feet. Fluting and stop-fluting are found at corners topped by a well carved rosette. Finials are of the cone variety. His carved shell is individualistic.

In July 1935 *Antiques* advertised and illustrated a cherry secretary from the collection of the late Dr. J. Milton Coburn, who at one period of his life lived in Danbury. Its present whereabouts is unknown. This piece was attributed to E. Booth of Woodbury and was given a date of 1760, which, of course, was much too early. The secretary had a brass eagle centered in the pediment, star inlay on the paneled doors, a deeply carved shell on the middle drawer identical to those on pieces now in Southbury, and the characteristic Spanish feet on short cabriole legs. While this was at the time attributed to E. Booth of Woodbury, it could possibly have been made by Ebenezer. Further study of the history of this piece is required.

In the Three Centuries of Connecticut Furniture exhibition at the Morgan Memorial, Hartford, 1935, was a mahogany highboy with scroll top, carved rosettes, cone finials, fluted columns with square rosettes above, square drawer in upper and lower sections with shell, cabriole legs with pad feet, the characteristic beading along the upper legs, and an

interesting snakeskin carving on the leg top (see frontispiece). This was attributed to an unknown cabinetmaker of Woodbury, Conn. This highboy has an interesting history. It was purchased by the late Samuel A. Griswold of Branford from an undertaker in Woodbury by the name of Swan, some fifty years ago for \$65. Swan had gotten it from the Stiles Russell family for less than that. Like so many pieces attributed to Booth, this had been made for a member of the Stiles family, Stiles Russell's mother having been a Stiles and this piece evidently a wedding present. The highboy was willed to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities by Mr. Griswold and is now in the Lt. Pratt House in Essex, Conn.

Still told in Southbury is the following tale about Elijah. His several young apprentices were obliged to work in the shop until sundown, when it was the chore of one of the lads to go to the back lot and bring in the cows. Like all normal boys, the apprentices resented this extra duty, so one night they all ran off and it was necessary for Elijah to search out the cows himself. Shortly after leaving home Elijah returned, somewhat breathless and without the cows. His wife could see he was flustered, perhaps aided by a long draught of homemade apple brandy.

"Anna, do bull frogs talk?" asked Elijah. "You know bull frogs don't talk," said Anna. "Well," replied Elijah, "I was down to the back lot by the pond and I heard a bull frog say, 'lijah Booth, 'lijah Booth, 'lijah Booth.'" "And then," added Elijah, still breathless, "a little peeper said, 'Damn him, damn him, damn him!'" After pausing a moment, Elijah added, "When bull frogs and peepers begin to talk, it's time for an

honest man to stay at home!" It leaked out later that the mischievous apprentices hidden near the footbridge had been highly successful in getting even with their master.

(Mr. and Mrs. Clarence G. Stiles of Southbury have kindly provided much of the information concerning Elijah Booth.)

**BOOTH, Joel, Newtown, Conn.**

Joel, the eldest son of Ebenezer, and nephew of Elijah, was born in Newtown, June 17, 1769, when his father was twenty-six and his uncle twenty-four. One year after Joel's birth, Elijah was in Woodbury. Thus it would seem probable that Joel learned his trade with his father. Joel was only twenty-one when his father died and he lived but four years longer. In those days, however, lads of fourteen began to learn their trade, and at his death in 1794 an inventory of his estate showed an enormous stock of material, finished and unfinished furniture, and joiner's tools. Evidently his death was very sudden for he had borrowed money from many people. It was apparently invested in his business, for when the estate was inventoried, large as it was, it had to be sold to pay an indebtedness amounting to £466:3:92, a very large sum. Much of it was due members of his family and those of his wife's, but some of it was probably owing for supplies. Administration of his estate was granted Nov. 6, 1794, and among other things the inventory included:

Joiner's Shop including Benches, Laythes	35/0/0
Work in Shop Part Done	
One finished case of Drawers at	180/
One Chest of Drawers & 20 two Bed chests	12/
One half of a Case of Drawers at	12/
One Cherry Desk begun	1/7
One Table Frame at	3/6
One Clock Case part done	1/8
One Mahogany frame for a desk at	12/
One three Square Candle Stand at	2/6
One fall stand at	12/
One Mahogany Card Table	30/
One Spinet at	12/
pillars and Loge for stand	1/6
One trundle bedstead	6/
Six plain Chairs red	3/
Two black chares at	4/

A great deal of furniture was listed in the house, including dining chairs, "Winsor" chairs, a huge red chest, "Leather back and Botom Chare," a case of drawers, a double leaf square table, "One Desk case of Drawers at 100/" etc.

Stock in the shop included: "Four Hundred and Forty-three feet of Mahogany Boards, Thirteen Hundred Cherry, Seventy-five of Whitewood, Two Hundred of Pine, Nine Hundred Feet of Cherry Boards."

His joiner's tools were in large numbers and of every kind: "Twenty-five molding tools, Three Rabit plains, four smoothing Do, two Jack Do, three Jointers, One plough, two Coars Saws, three Brass Back Do, one Steel back do, Four Compass Do, Five gouges, Chizzels, Turning Chizzels," etc.