

Nancy Carlisle

Inside SPNEA:

Newbury Furniture

A summer 2000 exhibition at SPNEA's One Bowdoin Square headquarters showcases the work of furniture artisans in the rural town and commercial port.

The town of Newbury was settled in 1635 on the coastline north of Boston, just above the Parker River in rich agrarian land surrounded by salt marsh. Settlement quickly moved north and west along the Merrimack River. Those who remained behind, in an area that came to be known as Old Town, as well as those who moved further north and west to what is now West Newbury, were mostly farmers, while those nearer the mouth of the Merrimack, called the "Waterside," became ship builders, mariners, tavern keepers, merchants, and the like. A division grew up between the two groups such that by 1763 residents of the Waterside petitioned the Massachusetts General Court to be allowed to form a separate township. Their petition suc-

ceeded, and Newburyport was established in 1764.

Newburyport thrived as a maritime and commercial center and for a time may have been the most densely populated and wealthiest town, in per capita terms, in Massachusetts Bay.¹ Newburyport's success continued through the Revolution and into the early years of the new republic but was shaken by the embargo and non-intercourse acts of 1807 and 1809. A major fire in 1811 destroyed much of the commercial property in town. About the same time the completion of the Lowell-Boston canal created new competition for shipping inland resources, a market Newburyport had previously controlled by way of the Merrimack River. Fishing and shipping continued, but Newburyport never again rose to the commercial heights it had known at the end of the

eighteenth century. In contrast, the surrounding town of Newbury during this period remained agricultural and, never having risen as far, was less affected by these shifting economic forces.

As part of the 1985 celebration of the 350th anniversary of the founding of Newbury, historian Peter Benes directed a project to identify all the surviving objects—furniture, prints, tools, and other artifacts—that were owned in Newbury or Newburyport between 1635 and 1835.² The result is an archive of materials that show consumer practice. The project also identified nearly 150 cabinetmakers, turners, joiners, and chair makers working in Newbury and Newburyport within this two-hundred-year period. This finding suggests that by the end of the eighteenth century furniture making in Newbury and Newburyport was an important industry, rivaling production in such better-known furniture centers as Salem, Massachusetts, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire.³

This study of selected Newbury and

Newburyport furniture draws on SPNEA's collection of more than fifty pieces made in these towns in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. These thirteen pieces are suggestive both of shop practice and consumer choice in Newbury and Newburyport in the period of Newburyport's ascendancy between roughly 1750 and 1810. More detailed study of this collection and other pieces of furniture made in the two towns might help answer questions that relate the manufacture and purchase of household goods to larger social and cultural issues—whether, for example, as Peter Benes suggests, the furniture tastes of rural consumers differed noticeably from those of urban buyers, whether consumers in agrarian or commercial areas identified a Newbury or Newburyport “style,” and how cabinetmakers, both rural and urban, understood and reached their markets.

All photographs are by David Bohl unless otherwise indicated.



Secretary, about 1805-10, made by Clark Morss (1783-1814), Newburyport; mahogany, mahogany veneer, white pine. 1975.191.

This Federal-style secretary is the only known labeled piece of furniture by cabinetmaker Clark Morss, whose shop was on Middle Street in Newburyport. The secretary's broadly sweeping base is typical of Massachusetts North Shore cabinetmaking of this period. While no other examples of Morss's work are known, the better-known cabinetmaker Joseph Short, whose account book survives at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, apparently bought piece work from Morss. To streamline production, preindustrial furniture makers, like postindustrial ones, often purchased parts from other craftsmen.



Rocking Chair, 1806, made by Joseph Short (1771-1819), Newburyport; mahogany, white pine, birch. 1986.43.

This rocking chair, whose removable slip seat concealed a potty hole, was almost certainly a custom order, perhaps made for an invalid. The chair is labeled by the Newburyport furniture maker Joseph Short and is inscribed with the date 1806. Rocking chairs had been in use at least since the middle of the eighteenth century, but this may be one of the earliest surviving dated rocking chairs. Although rockers were often added to chairs some time after they were made, the way the chair legs are tenoned into the rockers suggest that these are original.⁴



Left: *Desk and Bookcase, about 1780-1800, possibly made by Abner Toppan (1763-1836), Newburyport; mahogany, white pine. 1986.460.*

Right: *Desk and Bookcase, about 1775-1800, possibly made by Abner Toppan, Newburyport; cherry, white pine. 1942.1200.*

These two desk and bookcases are among a group of related case pieces with similar features, including the use of scrolled pediments with round cutouts and vase-shaped central plinths, carved pinwheels, serpentine door panels, and the S-shaped curved feet known as ogee bracket feet. Two similar pieces at the Newburyport Public Library and a high chest at the

Historical Society of Old Newbury are attributed to cabinetmaker Abner Toppan, suggesting that these too may have been made by him.⁶

The desk at left belonged to the Littles, a family with deep roots in Newbury who moved into the seventeenth-century Spencer-Peirce-Little house in 1851.



Interior of 1942.1200

They may at that time have cut down the bonnet (the covered pediment on the top of the case), cut the flames off the finials, and replaced the feet in order to fit the desk and bookcase into the low-ceilinged rooms of their home. A comparison to the cutout in the bonnet of the desk at right confirms that the two were made from the same template and, therefore, almost certainly in the same shop.⁷ The detail of the interior of the Little desk and bookcase (above) shows a feature that appears on numer-

ous desks with Newbury and Newburyport histories, some clearly made in workshops other than Toppan's. The bellied shape of the columns on the document drawers shows up again and again and suggests that Toppan and other local cabinetmakers were purchasing these from the same local turner, perhaps Joshua Davis or John Poor, two turners working in Newburyport in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.⁸



Looking Glass, about 1807-9, made by Bernard Cermenati (ca. 1783-1818), Newburyport; gilt wood and gesso, silvered and painted glass. 1963.101.

In 1807 Bernard Cermenati opened a looking glass store at 10 State Street in Newburyport, where he remained only two years before removing to Salem at the end of 1809. This labeled looking glass was purchased to embellish the low-ceilinged parlor of the seventeenth-century Coffin house on High Road in Newbury. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Coffin house had been legally divided and was inhabited by two families, cousins who were the fifth and sixth generations of Coffins to live in the house. Edmund Coffin (1764-1825) married his second wife in 1809. The wedding perhaps provided the occasion for the purchase of this looking glass, a fashionable and expensive addition to the family's most public room.

Bernard Cermenati was one of a number of Italian-born craftsmen working as gilders and looking-glass merchants in Boston, Salem, and Newburyport at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁵ All provided looking glasses like this one, in the simple, architectural style of the English design tradition. The pillar frame was common to New England looking glasses, and it is likely that one or two craftsmen supplied parts to many different looking-glass makers.



Desk, about 1780-1800, and Bookcase, about 1810, Newburyport; mahogany, white pine. 1940.799.

This desk and bookcase was owned by Richard Bartlet (1763-1832) and his wife Hannah Pettingell Bartlet (1765-1836) of Newburyport. The desk was made for Bartlet sometime between 1780 to 1800. Some years later he had the bookcase made for it, apparently not bothered by the stylistic inconsistencies of Federal inlays and pierced finials placed over a desk in Chippendale style, indicated by the ball-and-claw feet, the dropped shell pendant, the swelled front, the brasses, and the use of highly figured mahogany.⁹ Richard Bartlet came from a family of cordwainers, or shoemakers, who were among the first settlers of Newbury. He and his brother profited from mercantile interests during the Revolution, his brother becoming Newburyport's wealthiest citizen by the end of the eighteenth century. Yet despite his family's newfound wealth, a spirit of frugality may have led Bartlet to update, rather than replace, an old piece of furniture.



Upholstered Ribbon-Back Side Chair, about 1785-1800, Essex County, Massachusetts; mahogany. 1986.194.1.



Ribbon-Back Side Chair, about 1780-1810, Newbury or Newburyport; birch, soft maple, rush. 1986.38.2.



Parlor, Spencer-Pierce-Little house, Newbury, 1914, showing one of the ribbon-back chairs, photograph in Mary Northend, Historic Homes of New England (Boston, 1914).



Ribbon-Back Side Chair, about 1780-1810, Newbury or Newburyport; birch, soft maple, rush. 1986.64.2.

While chairs similar to these were made in Salem and southern New Hampshire, this simple type of ribbon-back chair appears to have been particularly popular in Newbury and Newburyport. These three examples came from the Little family. When they moved into the Spencer-Peirce-Little house in 1851 they found at least three chairs like these that had been left behind by the previous occupants. The rush-seated ribbon-back chair (center) is one of four that the Littles purchased at a local auction around 1850. Two pairs similar to these survive at the Coffin House, nearby on High Road, and the antique collector Ben: Perley Poore owned a pair at his Indian Hill estate in West Newbury. Another similar chair, from the Chase-Thurlow House in West Newbury, is now in the collections of the Historical Society of Old Newbury. A chair similar to the upholstered one at left belonged to Newburyport merchant Micajah Lunt (1764-1840) and survives in private ownership.¹¹



Drop-Leaf Tables, 1760-75, Newbury or Newburyport; mahogany, maple, white pine. 1963.110 (left) and 1998.1 (right).

These tables both have histories of use in Newbury, the one at left purchased for the Coffin House and the one at right bearing a history of ownership by Revolutionary War hero Offin Boardman.¹⁰ Although nearly identical in design, slight variations in construction details—the thickness of the “hinge” rails attaching the swinging legs, the design of the cutout on the hinge of those legs, the width of the top board—suggest that while undoubtedly made by the same shop, one table may have been made a few years later than the other when different materials were laid by; perhaps different journeymen made their own choices about how to attach the legs to the table top.



1963.110 fully extended.



1998.1 fully extended.



Dining room, Highfields (the Adams house), Byfield, Massachusetts, 1914, showing the rush-seated chairs, photograph in Mary Northend, Historic Homes of New England (Boston, 1914).

The design of the crest of these two chairs—incorporating a scalloped top with sharp projecting ends—survives on a small group of chairs with Newbury or southern New Hampshire histories. The chair at top right belonged to the Coffin family of Newbury. The other chair is one of a set of six purchased at the Byfield estate Highfields in 1938 by the collector Nina Fletcher Little. According to Highfield’s owner at the time, the chairs Little bought had belonged to his grandmother, Miriam Coker Thurlow of West Newbury. The distinctive bow-shaped crest on these two chairs and on related examples has led furniture scholars to speculate whether this might have been an identifiable feature of Newbury-made chairs in the eighteenth century. An intriguing reference in the 1784 Nantucket probate inventory of Silvanus Coffin to “6 Newberry Chairs” suggests that perhaps Newbury chairs were a known type. Yet given Coffin’s family connections to Newbury it seems equally likely that his six chairs were simply known to be a set that he had purchased there.¹²



*Rush-Seated Side Chair, about 1760-80,
Newbury; maple, ash, rush. 1991.537.2.*



*Rush-Seated Side Chair, about 1770-1800,
Newbury; maple, ash, rush. 1963.96.*

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Toppan charging Newburyport merchant Moses Brown for two pieces now in the library's collection. The high chest at the Historical Society of Old Newbury descended in the Toppan family. Mabel Munson Swan, "Newburyport Furnituremakers," *Antiques* 47, April 1945, 222-25, and Benes, *Old-Town and the Waterside*, 168. The desk at right is published in Brock Jobe and Myrna Kaye, *New England Furniture: The Colonial Era* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), 250-54.

7. Wherever possible, cabinetmakers used templates, or patterns, just as dressmakers do, so that each new piece did not require completely new designs.

8. Similar columns appear on a desk that is signed by Newburyport cabinetmaker Jonathan Kettell (1759-1848) and is illustrated in the Decorative Arts Photographic Collection, Winterthur Library, Winterthur, Del.

9. Jobe and Kaye, *New England Furniture*, 234-35.

10. The Coffin table is published in *ibid.*, 280-81. The Boardman table appeared at the sale of the Francis P. Garvan Collection, American Art Association, sale 3878, January 1931, lot 275.

11. Two of the Coffin chairs are described in Jobe and Kaye, *New England Furniture*, 431-34. The Lunt chair is illustrated and discussed in Benes, *Old-Town and the Waterside*, 128.

12. Nancy Richards and Nancy Goyne Evans *New England Furniture at Winterthur: Queen Anne and Chippendale Periods* (Winterthur, Del.: Winterthur Museum, 1997), 65-66.

NOTES

1. Peter Benes, *Old-Town and the Waterside* (Newburyport: Historical Society of Old Newbury, 1986), 17.
2. Benes, *Old-Town and the Waterside*, 181-82.
3. An exhaustive study of cabinetmakers, chair makers, and joiners in and around Portsmouth from the same period identified more than 250 craftsmen. Broke Jobe et al., *Portsmouth Furniture* (Boston: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 1993), 415-23.
4. SPNEA's Conservation Center concluded a scientific analysis of the finish on the rockers to compare to the finish on the rest of the chair, but the study was inconclusive.
5. Cermenati married a Newburyport native, Mary Rose Francis, who carried on his business in Boston after he died in 1818. She died only a year later, leaving five young, orphaned sons. Benes, *Old-Town and the Waterside*, 77; Betty Ring, "Check List of Looking-Glass and Frame Makers and Merchants Known by Their Labels," *Antiques* 119, May 1981, 1180-81; David Barquist, *American Tables and Looking Glasses* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Art Gallery, 1992), 327-31.
6. The Newburyport Public Library had a bill, now missing, dated 1795 from Abner