Connecticut Valley Furniture: More Than 14 Years of Research Finally Bears Its Fruit

by Jeanne Schinto

The big name in Connecticut River Valley furniture has long been Eliphalet Chapin (1741-1807) of East Windsor. The reputation of his cousin, Aaron Chapin (1753-1838) of Hartford, has always followed close behind. But in the marketplace and in collections, at least until recently, the Chapins were like the Seymours of Boston, the Goddards and Townsends of Newport, or the Willards of clock fame. Far too many pieces were attributed to them on the basis of faulty family histories, spotty scholarship, wishful thinking, or worse. "Most cherry case pieces with openwork pediments and carved volutes seem to have been attributed to [Eliphalet] Chapin at one time or another," wrote Thomas P. Kugelman and Alice K. Kugelman in an article published in the pages of *M.A.D.* in March 1993.

That article and two others by the Kugelmans and Robert Lionetti were published by *M.A.D.* in the early stages of the Hartford Case Furniture Survey, a field study that the three independent scholars began more than 14 years ago. Unequaled in its depth of detail, it is being hailed as precedent-setting by furniture scholars laboring in their own regional vineyards.

The years of documentary work took place in town archives, libraries, and occasionally graveyards, where headstones provided names and dates. The physical evidence—the furniture itself—was found across the country. The results of this project, now being made public, are a massive book (540 pages, 445 illustrations), to be published in June, and a traveling museum exhibit. The exhibit, scheduled to open at its second venue, the Connecticut Historical Society in Hartford on June 23, debuted on January 29 at the Concord Museum in Concord, Massachusetts, where we saw it.

Existing attributions will now necessarily have their period of adjustment, won't they? we asked the husband-wife Kugelman couple in interviews following the exhibit's opening party in Concord. "We hope so," said Tom Kugelman. "In fact, it's already happened. Deerfield, for example, has a high chest and set of chairs, previously attributed to Eliphalet Chapin, which now are believed to have been made by his former apprentice Julius Barnard. Probably people in the trade, the dealers, are going to have to make the biggest adjustment."

"But they'll have lists of specific things to look for now," said Alice Kugelman in the same conversation. "How a backboard is attached, for example. People didn't look at that before. You can learn how to do that in about ten seconds, although some other things to check for are a lot more complicated."

Once new brand names are established, dealers will have more to market, we suggested. "That's true, but the problem today is that the big names sell," said Tom, who with Alice has been collecting American furniture for over 30 years. "If it's by Townsend or Goddard or Chapin, it will command a big price. The initial reason for our starting this study was that we were skeptical about all these Chapin attributions, and that's going to die hard. A dealer would much rather sell a bureau that can be attributed to Chapin, even though it may not fit the criteria we've established for it. Time will tell how that works out."

Susan P. Schoelwer of the Connecticut Historical Society, who was project director for this exhibit, anticipates that the new research will change descriptions in her own catalog. It includes 475 pieces of furniture and 90 clocks—the largest and most significant public Connecticut collection anywhere. "A considerable number of our pieces are included in the book," she said. (A majority of the 23 pieces in the exhibit are theirs too.) "Certainly this research provides a clearer framework for attributing them. We've always had this body of study called 'Connecticut furniture' and documentation on specific pieces." What they lacked, however, was a classification system, and that is now provided by the project. With that framework in place, individual pieces can be grounded more persuasively in space and time.

"I fully expect that some of our new hypotheses will ultimately be proven wrong," Schoelwer proclaimed. "You can take any piece from the exhibit and construct an argument against its attribution. But if the project causes someone to do further research, that all helps build up the picture of Connecticut furniture."

The Kugelmans have lived in Connecticut for 40 years. "We're both Yalies too," said Tom, a physician. Alice, who studied musical performance, is an appraiser specializing in American furniture and silver. The third team member, Robert Lionetti, is a cabinetmaker and professional furniture consultant who lives and works in Connecticut too. The study began, then, in their own backyard, in that part of the Connecticut River Valley surrounding Hartford. Their territory later grew, reaching as far south as East Haven, Connecticut, and as far north as the Berkshires of Massachusetts. The colleagues eventually identified three major styles, which they call Wethersfield, East Windsor, and Colchester, although pieces identified as such may have been made elsewhere. They also identified a fourth style, named for the Springfield-Northampton area of Massachusetts. Whenever they could, they attributed a piece to a specific local shop.

The team members' tasks were assigned according to aptitude. "Alice was the scribe and the idea person," said Tom. "I was the one who came up with the concept," said Alice. "Genealogy was my field," continued Tom, who was praised by the others for his photographic memory, "and I took all the research photography." That's some 8000 prints and slides, no digitals, since the project began way back before that technology was widely available.

The Kugelmans relied on Robert Lionetti for his technical knowledge and insights. "Robert has made a lot of furniture, so he is able to get into the mind of the cabinetmaker and say, `Here's why he did it this way.' So he was able to clarify a lot of issues that we as non-technicians couldn't." He was responsible for "authentication."

What about looking into the deep recesses of the cabinets? Who was the light holder? "Everybody was a light holder," said Alice. "But Robert was the one who stuck his head into the pieces," said Tom. "We used an auto mechanic's mirror to look for inscriptions."

The team relied on science, not connoisseurship, to make their decisions. "The concept of connoisseurship is what Charles F. Montgomery promulgated," said Alice. "It tends to emphasize `good, better, best.' We took a very different approach. We likened it to forensic investigation, because the real work and real results came after we had gathered the physical evidence."

Tom described discussions that he and Alice had with Robert, whose training and experience made him reluctant to abandon connoisseurship. "Robert had been a dealer and still is to some degree and loved to make value judgments, whether the piece was `superior,' `average,' `too big,' et cetera, and we'd have to remind him, `Robert, you're a scientist now, not a dealer.'"

One "pathetic" piece (the Kugelmans' word), a high chest with no legs, bore important initials and a date. In the attic of Alexander King's house in Suffield, Connecticut, they found another sorry sight that nonetheless rewarded them with information. It was a charred highboy, burned in a fire. "We call it the crispy highboy," said Alice. "But even though the piece had no value, we still could identify in it the characteristics we were after."

King's sister married Aaron Chapin. It's not just an idle fact. Establishing familial connections often proved a very effective way of documenting furniture. Genealogical records were critical because no Chapin account books have been found (although Chapin appears in the account books of others).

There is no known signed piece of Chapin furniture, either. And there is only one known Chapin bill of sale, now lost. ("The bill of sale was reported to have been seen by Irving Lyon," said Tom, referring to the author of the pioneering 1891 work The Colonial Furniture of New England.)

Why didn't Chapin ever sign? Although guessing is obviously not the team's style, Tom gamely responded to this question: "He was the master of the shop, and, in our experience, up until the 1790's shop masters in Connecticut were anonymous. They didn't need to sign their work because everybody knew who they were. When you get into the 1790's, cabinetmakers were working in larger communities, in multiple shops, and with retailers, so you're more likely to find pieces they labeled or signed."

It's unclear why underlings in those shops—apprentices, journeymen, and employees—did leave their marks. "In some instances, they signed their `proof' pieces," said Tom. "In others, they signed to identify a stack of lumber. We have pieces with three or four different names on them. Sometimes they are just first names; sometimes just initials. William Flagg used a chisel to incise `W.F.' in several pieces. That was his trademark."

As many readers are aware, a highly ambitious furniture field study is underway in Rhode Island. That team is headed by Yale University Art Gallery's Patricia E. Kane, and its members are professional scholars. It's interesting to note that Kane, in her foreword to the Chapin book, acknowledges that much new scholarship in the decorative arts has come from independent scholars such as the Kugelmans and Lionetti. The Kugelmans, for their part, while praising the work of Kane as "monumental," single out the research of independent scholar Benjamin Hewitt as inspirational. "Ben Hewitt, who was a great influence on us, was an industrial psychologist in New Haven," said Tom, "and he, like us, got skeptical about attributions and decided to do something about it." (Hewitt's study culminated in Yale's 1982 exhibition and book *The Work of Many Hands: Card Tables in Federal America 1790-1820*.)

It can be helpful to use a sponsoring organization's name as one's calling card, but independence can also work to one's advantage. "Museum professionals often just don't have the time that people like us do," said Tom. "They have day jobs and are often not very well paid. Alice and I decided that we could commit my day off every week [Wednesday] to doing this. That's how it worked out." Alice added, "Independence also allows you to fail and no one would know."

What further distinguished them from affiliated scholars was their special access to private collections. Many pieces are still owned by the families for whom they were originally made. Some people may have been reluctant to cooperate with strangers no matter how distinguished their letterhead. When this threesome knocked on doors, they were following up referrals from close friends and associates in their collectors' network.

Maybe an auction house would have done well to put a tail on the trio, but auctioneers over these past 14-plus years have found their own way to plenty of Connecticut material. "The auction houses are like conveyor belts. The material goes in and goes out, constantly," said Tom. "And I must say we have had virtually one hundred percent cooperation from all of them."

About ten years into its work, the team reached a plateau, when few new discoveries were being made and few fresh thoughts were occurring to them. "At that point," said Tom, "we turned to CHS [the Connecticut Historical Society] and said, `How would you like to publish this stuff and do an exhibit?'"

In June 2001 CHS submitted a grant proposal to the Henry Luce Foundation. The foundation provided major funding.

CHS's Susan Schoelwer brought another level of expertise to the project, a knowledge of Connecticut history and culture. We asked Schoelwer why 18th-century Connecticut experienced what, in retrospect, appears to have been a golden age of furniture design and production.

"Furniture study is just reaching the point where it's looking into some of these regions outside the major metropolitan areas," she said. "When I was at Winterthur years and years ago [1975-77], everybody said there wasn't any such thing as southern furniture. And we know what's happened to that field since. Sumpter Priddy, who was in my class, now has shelves and shelves of photos of regional furniture from Virginia and the South." In another 20 years, we'll see studies of many other regions, she predicted. Even now, however, she believes Connecticut's situation was "if not unique, then very unusual."

First, it was an early settlement, from the 1630's. Second, there was wealth. It wasn't kingly, like a port city's wealth, but it was generally distributed. The money came from cattle raising in Colchester, tobacco and horses in East Windsor, and onion fields in Wethersfield. "The onions were being sent to the West Indies to feed the slaves on the sugar plantations," Schoelwer said. Topography also played a role in the phenomenon. "The region is isolated from the metropolitan models, so there was a certain freedom. One can look at this as a negative but also as a positive, because it spawned creativity."

On the morning after the exhibit's opening party at the Concord Museum, Schoelwer gave a gallery talk in which she described Eliphalet Chapin as "a hard taskmaster, who ran a tightly controlled shop." Asked how she knew his personality, she said, "That description ultimately comes from Tom."

Tom provided us with more detail. "No other shop, with the possible exception of the Goddard-Townsend shops in Newport, produced pieces, in terms of the details of construction, that were so much like each other," said Tom. "The only variation one sees from one Chapin piece to another is in the surface decoration. So he obviously ran a tight ship, because we estimate that at any given time he had three or four people working in the shop with him. We found that level of consistency for our region to be quite unusual, and quite different from the Colchester and Wethersfield styles."

Tom also tells a fascinating story of Chapin's personal life, gleaned from a key document in a private collection. It describes Chapin's efforts to rejoin the East Windsor church that banished him after a paternity suit was filed against him. "It seems clear that Chapin got a girl pregnant in 1766," said Tom. "It was a common happening in the eighteenth century. And the accepted practice was for the guy to marry the girl, but Chapin refused and instead left town," for Philadelphia. Chapin did his apprenticeship there. He returned to East Windsor four years later and began to make masterful furniture in his own idiosyncratic way. The rest, as they say, is history.

The exhibit, *Connecticut Valley Furniture by Eliphalet Chapin and His Contemporaries, 1750-1800*, is scheduled to be on view in Concord until June 5. For information, call (978) 369-9763 or see the Web site (www.concordmuseum.org). The Connecticut Historical Society plans to have the exhibit from June 23 through October 30. For details on that run, see the Web site (www.chs.org) or call (860) 236-5621.

Information about the book may be found at the Web site of its publisher, the University Press of New England (www.upne.com), or by calling UPNE at (800) 421-1561.

As for the Hartford Case Furniture Survey, it is ongoing, the team wants readers to know. In fact, two more pieces entered it as a result of the auctions during January's Antiques Week in New York City, one each from Sotheby's and Christie's.

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