

COLLECTING CLASSIC BOOKS ON COLONIAL FURNITURE

A resource guide for the apprentice, journeyman, or master

BY FRANK RHODES



Consider the following two scenarios.

Recently I attended a seminar on carving the Philadelphia cartouche. The workshop was fascinating, but of course it could only serve to introduce the subject. I wanted to learn more. I researched carvers from that era and found three great articles on Philadelphia carving shops, all written by Luke Beckerdite for *The Magazine Antiques*, which I had in my library.

Last year a customer came to my shop with what appeared to be a mid-17th century carved oak chest. It needed some re-gluing and some earlier poor repairs corrected. I naturally turned to one of my favorite books, *America's Furniture In The Museum of Fine Arts Boston (1965)* by Richard N. Randall, Jr., where I found some similar examples. As one text referenced another, I found myself reading *The Pine Ø' !} æ' !^ of Early New England (1929)* by Russell Hawes Kettle, *The Hadley Chest (1935)* by Clair Franklin Luther, *Furniture Treasury (1928)* by Wallace Nutting, and various *Antiques* magazine articles. After consulting these *reference* works in my collection, I felt that I could confidently discuss the project with my client and restore the chest.

If, like me, you are a furniture maker specializing in American period furniture, then there is nothing like having a good reference library to inform the work you do in your shop. You might argue that in a workshop there are more pressing issues like quality control, paying the bills, marketing, performing jobs in a timely way and all of the general subjects relating to operation a small business. Why collect books?

I have a great passion for early American furniture, both for making it and

understanding its rich history. I was fortunate that as a child my exposure to great American works was extensive; close encounters in homes and trips to local museums helped to train my eye at an early age. It was like osmosis! Being able to take in the subtleties of materials, dimensions and proportions,

although I didn't realize the importance of it at the time, was formative. The difference between mediocre and marvelous designs resonated with me at an early age. This is so important when crafting a new piece or restoring an old one, and this is why I feel that furniture books are so important. One needs to constantly study photos to train the eye, and read articles to expand an understanding of American furniture. I try to look at book. and articles several nights a week; it keeps my brain stimulated and refreshed.

To me, books on furniture are very addictive. If I am researching a piece, such as the carved oak chest I mentioned earlier, sometimes each reference I consult will open more doors and the subject can become a bit overwhelming; however, I believe that with more sources one can form relatively definitive results. You read one book, find out about another, and the subject just keeps growing. A work from the 1930s might be revisited in the 1990s and the perspective on the piece has changed. Historians are constantly finding new facts. A newly discovered signed chest might attribute several others to a completely new school. This is what history is all about.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Growing up in Philadelphia my exposure was to the Chester County School of furniture and surrounding areas. The Philadelphia style known for its ornate rococo design is

also a favorite. I prefer to have a well rounded and diverse appreciation for all our furniture history. Our ancestors brought their own European skills and designs which were gradually transformed into a truly American school. Furniture of our

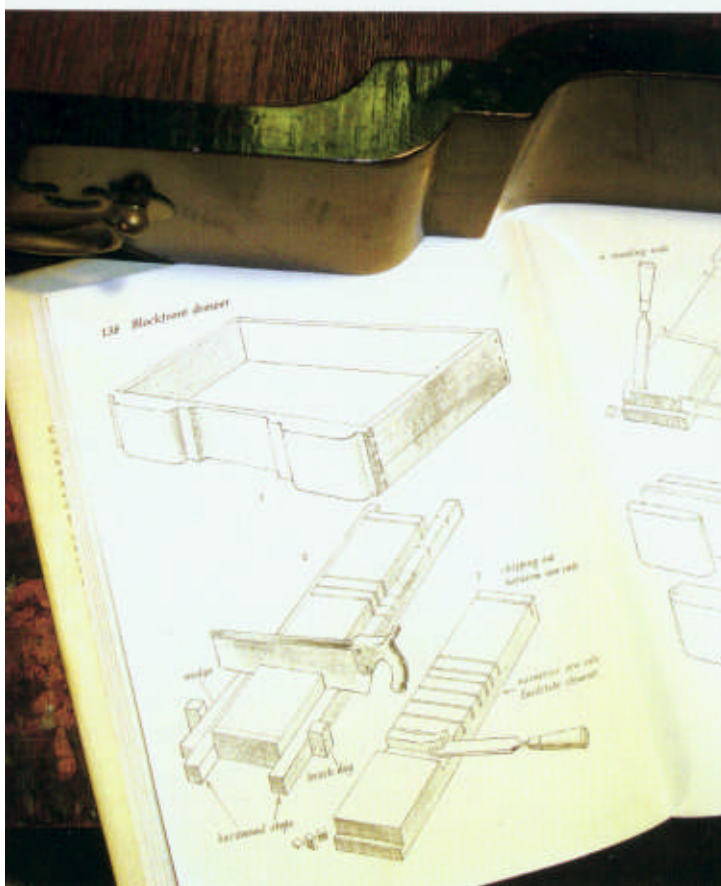
Forefathers (1901), Ester Singleton, gives good information on the transition of European to American woodworking styles. On furnituremakers, *The Cabinetmakers of 5a YfM* (1957) by Ethel Hall Bjorkoe and *American Cabinetmakers: Marked American Furniture, 1640-1940* (1995) by William C. Ketchum Jr. are both recommended.

The earliest book on colonial furniture in my collection is *Colonial Furniture of New England: A study cZY domestic furniture in use in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (1891) by Irving Whithall Lyon, which offers good basic information and photos. Some early books that every library should have are *Furniture cZYCXYb Time* (1902), Frances Clary Morse; *Colonial Furniture in America* (1913), Luke Vincent Lockwood; *Furniture Treasury* (1928), Wallace Nutting; *The Blue Book on Philadelphia Furniture* (1935), William Macpherson Hornor; and *American Antique Furniture: a book for amateurs* (1937), Edgar G. Miller. Many of these books have been reprinted; the newer editions can usually be found at reasonable prices. All of these early books I consider to be working copies in my woodshop. The Nutting book has the most pictures and the least text; the others have more text and varying grades of photos. I generally use the Nutting book most of all during shop consultations with customers.

Research and photography in the last forty years has taken our furniture knowledge to a new plateau. American Antiques from the Israel Sack Collection, Volumes 1-10 has better photography and text than the Nutting book for identifying early furniture. Then you can advance to the sophisticated *American Furniture (1993-present* annual publication of the Chipstone

Foundation, edited

by Luke Beckerdite. Some of the



Reference books can be an invaluable tool in the shop for everything from identifying a particular historical piece to practical information on furnituremaking techniques.

articles dissect a particular style or furniture group. It is dense reading at times, yet every shop should have a set.

Can you look at a Hadley Chest, for instance, and name all of the case parts, carvings, turnings, etc? Such knowledge may be important when selling yourself to a perspective customer. *Field Guide to American Antique Furniture: A Unique Visual System for Identifying the Style of Virtually Any Piece of American Antique Furniture* (1985) by Joseph T. Butler and Ray Skibinski is a great reference book at a reasonable price. This book identifies the various parts as well as regional differences.

AREAS OF INTEREST

After your library is started you might want to concentrate on specific topics. What are your furniture interests or specialties? Is it a style, a region, a period, a furniture type, a particular furniture maker? Each one of these subjects can lead to still other areas of investigation. (see Looking Back)

Just as an example, the following are books focussing on the furniture of specific geographical regions, traveling from north to south.

The Best the Country Affords: Vermont Furniture, 1765-1850 (1995), Kenneth J. Zogry;

Portsmouth Furniture: Masterworks from the New Hampshire Seacoast (1993), Brock Jobe; *Rhode Island Furniture 1730-1810* (1965), Joseph K. Ott;

Boston Furniture Of the Eighteenth Century (1972), Colonial Society of Massachusetts;

Two Towns, Concord 6- Wethersfield (1982), Peter Benes;

Connecticut Valley Furniture by Eliphalet Chapin And Ills Contemporaries, 1750-1800, (2005), Susan Schoelwer;

New York Furniture before 1840 (1962, Albany Institute of History and Art;

Philadelphia Furniture and Its Makers (1975), John J. Snyder;

Furniture and Its Makers of Chester County, Pennsylvania (1966), Margaret B. Schiffer;

Colonial Furniture of West New Jersey (1936), Thomas S. Hopkins and Walter S. Cox;

Ohio Furniture Makers, Volume One (1984), and *Volume Two* (1989), Jane Sikes Hageman and Edward M. Hageman;

Furniture in Maryland 1740-1940 (1984), Gregory A. Weidman;

Plain and Ornamental: Delaware Furniture, 1740-1890 (1984), Deborah D. Waters;

Classic Norfolk Furniture: 1810-1840 (2004),

Thomas R. Newbern and James R. Melchor; *Kentucky Furniture Exhibition Catalog* (1974), LB. Speed Art Museum;

The Art and Mystery of "Tennessee Furniture and Its Makers Through 1850 (1988), Nathan Harsh, Derita C. Williams, and C. Tracey Parks;

The Furniture of Charleston, 1680-1820, 2003, Bradford L. Rauschenberg and John Bivins, Jr.;

Neat Pieces: the plain style furniture of 19th-century Georgia (1983), The Atlanta History Center;

Early Furniture of Louisiana, 1750-1830 (1972), Jessie Itch.

And each of these will suggest still other source materials for that region of study! One book of particular interest is *American Furniture Craftsmen Working Prior to 1920* (1984) by Charles J. Semowich. It is an annotated bibliography, listing by state various books, magazines articles, catalogues and craftsmen with cross references of authors. This is a must-have book; a little pricey, but it will provide quick access to reference materials available before 1984 for a particular region.

WORKING COPIES AND COLLECTIBLES

My library is a combination of working copies and collectibles. As a furniture maker I feel that most of my books can be used in the shop if needed. Some of my books, however, are more valuable—they are rare or inscribed by the author. I protect them with a Mylar cover, store them away from the shop, and consult them as needed. However, the great majority of my books, magazines, and catalogs, both old and new, are for use. A little dust will not ruin a book; sitting on a shelf a book will collect dust. Even so, protecting your collection is important even if they will be working copies in the shop. There are protective covers for books with or without jackets and archival covers for your early magazines. For periodicals, covers and cases can sometimes be purchased from the publisher.

Going from a reference library of working books to a collection containing rare and expensive books can be a slippery slope. There are numerous books available at varying prices, and with some research you can narrow the choices to fit your interests and budget. The key is to be patient and enjoy your book collecting. If you are interested in new books, do some research, find out the production run. I have seen some

great new books priced over \$100, only to see them drop to \$35 or \$40 because of overproduction. On the other hand, some books are only printed once or have been out of print for a long time. Those are the ones in which to invest. Beware, however, if a new edition is a low, one time only printing; dealers have been known to purchase the remaining 100 copies of a 500 copy book run in order to market them one at a time and make big bucks.

It may take a little diligence but most books can be found one place or another. (see sources in Looking Back) These days, one of the most valuable sources is the Internet. Sonic book sites have a wish list which will automatically send notification when an old publication becomes available. Half.com is a guide to locate such items. Some book purveyors, such as Joslin Hall, send out a monthly newsletter and many others will contact you when they receive items in which you have expressed an interest.

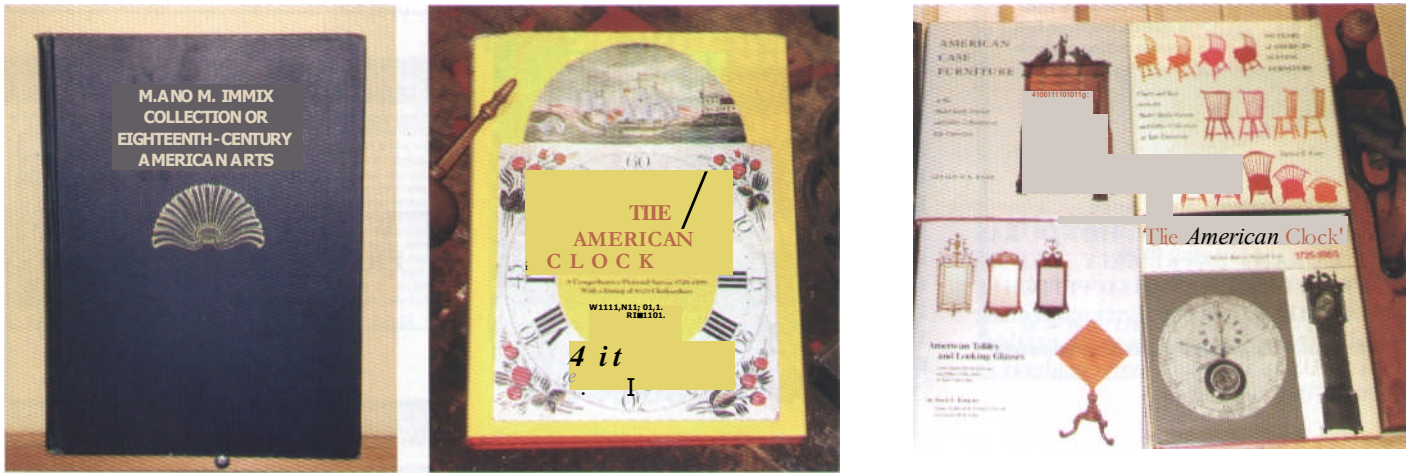
Be careful with online purchases. Check to see if there is a return policy and what the terms are. Once I bought a relatively new book that was rare and discovered 15 pages of photographs were carefully cut out! Fortunately, I was able to return it for a full refund. Also don't be in a rush to buy a rare book. Not too long ago, a rare set of three books I had been following came to market on the Internet for \$1700. A dealer friend of mine had sold his last set for \$650 months before and said they were scarce. I waited. Then, four months later, with the prices so high, suddenly many sets appeared "out of the woodwork"...offered by dealers thinking they could now get those high prices. And like the stock market, they all dropped and were soon selling for \$375-\$425 for a fine set. I have a set in my woodshop now and it is frequently visited.

The number of books available on American furniture can be overwhelming. Start in on area of interest. Contact some book dealers, antique dealers, fellow woodworkers or search the web about a particular project you need more information about. Time is so important to all of us. Be patient; a working shop's book collection will slowly grow.

Frank B. Rhodes has been a furniture maker and conservator in Chestertown, Maryland since 1983.

More Books on American Colonial Furniture

BY FRANK RHODES



A sampling of titles from the author's collection of reference books, ranging from old and rare to recent and readily available.

There are an overwhelming number of books on American period furniture, and any list will obviously have many omissions. Additionally, your own interests and needs will guide you into different directions. Still, I will mention eight broad areas of interest and a few books that I would suggest as starting points for each. The categories are: furniture collections; exhibitions; auctions; clockmaking; chairs; case furniture; paint-decorated furniture; and furnituremaking techniques.

The Pendleton Collection (1904) is probably one of the rarest early books on furniture collections. A more affordable and well-documented collection is the *M & M Karolick Collection (1941)*. Also worth noting are four catalogues from the Mable Brady Garvin and other collections at Yale University: *The American Clock 1725-1865 (1973)*, by Edwin A. Battison and Patricia E. Kane; *300 Years of American Seating Furniture: Chairs and Beds (1976)*, by Patricia E. Kane; *American Case Furniture (1988)*, by Gerald W. R. Ward; and *American Tables and Looking Glasses (1992)* by David L. Barquist.

For exhibitions, *The Girl Scouts Loan Exhibition (1929)* is a classic. This has been reprinted at a price around \$75.00.

There are many, many auction catalogues

available, but here are a few that stand out as documents of well-known sales: *Howard Reifsnnyder Collection (1929)*; *Arthur Sussel Collection (1958)*; *Bernice Garbisch Collection (1980)*; and *Eddy Nicholson Collection (1995)*.

If you are interested in clocks, *The American Clock (1976)*, by William H. Diston and Robert Bishop, is a good resource book, as well as the Battison and Kane catalogue mentioned earlier.

For chairs, *American Seating Furniture 1630-1730 (1988)*, by Benno M. Forman, a Winterthur book, or *American Chairs (1972)*, by John T. Kirk, will be a good start.

In addition to the the work by Gerald Ward mentioned under catalogues, *American Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Late Colonial Period—The Queen Anne and Chippendale Styles (1985)*, by Morrison H. Heckscher, has various references on case goods.

For painted furniture, two books I recommend are *American Painted Furniture 1660-1880 (1972)*, by Dean A. Fales, Jr., and *American Fancy: Exuberance in the Arts, 1790-1840 (2005)*, by Sumpter T. Priddy III. A more specialized work that is excellent is

The Pennsylvania-German Decorated Chest (1978), by Monroe H. Fabian.

On furnituremaking, I have not found an early definitive book but have found these two volumes helpful: *Furniture Design and Draughting (1900)*, by Alvan Crocker Nye; *Masterpieces of Furniture in Photography and Measured Drawings (1931)*, by Verna Cook Salomanski.

Finally, *American Furniture of the 18th Century: History, Technique, Structure (1996)*, by Jeffrey P. Green, offers a broad range of information.

SOURCES:

www.abaa.org
www.abebooks.com
www.addall.com
www.alibris.com
www.amazon.com
www.catalogkid.com
www.chipstone.org
www.ebay.com

www.halfebay.com
www.joslinhall.com
www.mackayandfieldantiques.com
museumbooks@verizon.net
www.oldemill.com
www.schifferbooks.com