

Boston Furniture Masterworks at Historic Deerfield

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Since the late 17th century, the city of Boston, Massachusetts, has been home to many industrious and skilled furniture makers. By the second quarter of the 18th century, a large community of craftsmen and related tradesmen had settled in the city, making Boston an important center of furniture production in Britain's North American colonies. This community grew with the city's population into the 19th century and with the arrival of new immigrants to Boston—including the important father-son team of cabinetmakers, John and Thomas Seymour. While many of these craftsmen produced furniture that conformed with the popular styles of the day—from the exuberance of the Rococo to the clean lines of the early Neoclassical—they also experimented with designs and building materials, thus contributing to the development of distinct regional forms or a “Boston style,” examples of which are discussed below.

Since its inception in 1952, Historic Deerfield has collected Boston furniture for both its aesthetic quality and for its influence on furniture design here in the Connecticut River Valley. The “Boston style” was transmitted to the Valley in two primary ways: through elite Connecticut River Valley families who purchased Boston-made furniture, and through craftsmen who trained in Boston and later relocated to the Valley. Examples of the latter include William Manley (ca. 1703-1787), who moved from Boston to Wethersfield, Connecticut, in 1729, and Samuel Means (1700-1757), who moved from Boston to Springfield, Massachusetts, in the 1730s. To celebrate the significant impact of Boston furniture on the history of American furniture design, this handout presents a chronological listing of several exceptional Boston furniture forms from Historic Deerfield's rich collection.

To locate the furniture discussed in this handout, please look for the red “*Boston Furniture*” labels positioned throughout the gallery. Each label has a specific number that corresponds with the numbered descriptions below.



1. High chest, Charles Wharham (1701-1799), Boston, Massachusetts, 1724-1733. Red maple, white pine, gesso, paint, gilding, brass. 56.152.

Charles Wharham (1701-1779), a London-born cabinetmaker who settled in Boston before 1724 and moved to Charleston, South Carolina by 1733, made this high chest of drawers. The chest's black painted surface and chinoiserie, or Chinese inspired, decoration was known during the period as “japanning” and was likely done by one of Boston's twelve known japanners operating in the city in the 18th century, one of whom likely signed Wharham's name on the backs of the drawers in his workshop.

Japanning is a Western imitation of Asian lacquerware. Unable to obtain the primary material for making true lacquerware—resin from the Asian lac tree (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum*)—Western craftsmen experimented with paint, metallic powder, gold leaf, and clear varnishes to recreate the look of lacquer. A time-consuming and labor-intensive process, japanning was an expensive decorative option that only the very wealthy afforded. Although japanned furniture was probably made in other American cities, only Boston-made examples survive.



2. Dressing table, Boston, Massachusetts, ca. 1740. Black walnut, walnut veneer, maple, white pine, paint, gilding, brass, iron. 56.153.

The well-executed details on this dressing table, such as the veneers, star inlay, gilded decoration, and carved feet, illustrate the highly specialized nature of furniture making and the advanced economy in early Boston. While the cabinetmaker was certainly an expert and possibly sawed the veneer and carved the drawer and legs himself, his primary role was to coordinate the assembly of products provided by other specialists, such as the sawyer, carver, gilder, founder, and engraver. The work exhibited by the table also speaks to a transatlantic cross-pollination of skill and aesthetics. The “star inlay” motif, popular with early 18th-century Boston cabinetmakers and derived directly from London, embellished plain surfaces and could conceal veneer joins. The style is sometimes associated with the work of Ebenezer Hartshorn (1690-1781) of Charlestown, Boston, and Concord, Massachusetts.



3. Tea table, Boston, Massachusetts, 1735-1745. Mahogany, white pine. 62.044.

This complex, “turret top” tea table is one of five known American examples, all of which are from the Boston area. It was in the vanguard of furniture design—with curving cabriole legs and claw and ball feet—when made by an unidentified Boston craftsman during the second quarter of the 18th century. Inspired by prototypes from northern Europe and Great Britain, the woodworker used an expensive slab of mahogany about two inches thick, and shaped it carefully to form twelve individual niches or turrets. These were intended as display or resting places for teacups and saucers, themselves a form of status. Historic Deerfield founder, Henry Needham Flynt (1893-1970), purchased the table as a birthday gift for his wife and co-founder, Helen Geier Flynt (1895-1986), in the 1960s. Similar examples of the form are in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, MA), the Winterthur Museum (Winterthur, DE), and the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens (Houston, TX).

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4. Side chair, possibly Boston, Massachusetts, ca. 1740. Walnut, walnut veneer, white pine, red maple. 66.026.

The ornate carving on the chair's crest rail (top of chair back) and knees (top of chair legs) is expressive of the Rococo style of the mid to late 18th century. Rooted in France in the 1730s, the Rococo style quickly gained popularity in other countries, including England and America, where it was adopted to different degrees. Hallmarks of the style included asymmetrical, fanciful, and naturalistic forms, such as the shell carvings on this chair attributed to the Boston craftsman and carver John Welch (1711-1789). The chair's ownership history also supports a Boston attribution. This chair and its mate, also in Historic Deerfield's collection, are believed to have been part of a set of 6 chairs made for John Fayerweather (1685-1760), a successful Boston merchant, whose daughter, Margaret Fayerweather Bromfield (1732-1761), is believed to have embroidered the canvaswork seat covers. The other chairs in the Fayerweather set are in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum (New York, NY) and the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, MA).



5. Desk and bookcase, attributed to John Cogswell (1738-1819), Boston, Massachusetts, ca. 1770. Mahogany, cherry, white pine, brass, linen. 56.368.

The form of this desk and bookcase, attributed to Boston cabinetmaker John Cogswell (1738-1819), is commonly referred to as bombé or swelled—referring to the lower case's curved profile. The form is ordinarily—but not exclusively—associated with the city of Boston due to the survival of several important bombé case pieces made by or attributed to Boston cabinetmakers George Bright (1727-1805), Benjamin Frothingham (1734-1809), James McMillian (d. 1769), John Cogswell (1738-1819), and Gibbs Atkins (1739-1806). The form is derived from Dutch and French designs, and was produced to be intentionally showy. The cabinetmaker achieved the rounded shape by cutting the sides from solid slabs of mahogany, each nearly three inches thick—conspicuous consumption in the use of expensive wood. Much of the desk-and-bookcase's expense reflected the cost of labor to cut, carve, plane, and smooth all the components and to fit them together with 298 dovetails.



6. Desk, possibly Boston or Salem, Massachusetts, 1765-1780. Mahogany, sylvestris pine, white pine, yellow-poplar, brass. Gift of the Estate of Mrs. W. Scott Cluett, 2003.21.23.

This "block front" desk—named for its projecting and receding front panels—is a form typically associated with Boston, although it was reproduced in other areas, namely Salem, Massachusetts and Newport, Rhode Island. A desk and bookcase made in 1738 by Job Coit (1692-1741) and Job Coit, Jr. (1717-1745) is the earliest signed and dated example of Boston block front furniture. Similar to the nearby bombé desk and bookcase (no. 5), the creation of the block front was a wasteful process, and entailed carving each of the drawer fronts from separate mahogany slabs. This time consuming process, combined with the cost of mahogany, only added to the expense of the piece. Although possibly made in Boston, the desk's central carved shell drop along the lower edge, and the lid's block front shape, are more characteristic of Salem-made pieces.



7. Desk, attributed to John (1738-1818) or Thomas Seymour (1771-1849), Boston, Massachusetts, 1800-1810. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, white pine, yellow-poplar, glass, brass, textile. Gift of Mrs. J. Philip Walker, 85.015.

The simple straight lines and delicate scale of this desk and bookcase—attributed to John (1738-1818) or Thomas (1771-1849) Seymour of Boston—epitomize the early Neoclassical style. Popular in America beginning in the late 18th century, the early Neoclassical style drew its inspiration from ancient Roman design. The desk is also significant for its innovative construction. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, upwardly mobile American consumers desired furniture that embodied new ideas about their professional identities, refinement, and education. This lightweight, portable desk was intended for a man, a counterpart to the newly-fashionable lady's writing desk. The desk's interior arrangement of compartments and drawers features two long slots to accommodate large-format ledgers and account books, features omitted from ladies' writing desks. The brass casters and side handles allow it to be moved into natural light for writing, drawing, reading, and keeping accounts. The desk's hinged, adjustable writing surface creates a comfortable work angle, and the tambour lid—a French innovation introduced to England around 1750 and commonly used in Neoclassical furniture—provides a practical way to conceal storage areas.

Several of the desk's characteristics support the attribution to the Seymour's shop. The fluted legs carved at their upper ends with acanthus leaves are likely the work of Thomas Wightman (d. 1819), a highly skilled carver who immigrated to Boston from London in 1797 and worked as a journeyman in the Seymour shop until 1817. Other construction features are unique to the Seymour's work. For example, the drawer sides are attached to the fronts and backs with small, meticulous dovetails. Closely spaced rectangular glue blocks reinforce the joints between the drawer bottoms, fronts, and sides. Partitions within the larger prospect box are attached to the box's sides and bottom with tenons fitted into mortises and secured with wedges.



8. Sideboard, attributed to John (1738-1818) or Thomas Seymour (1771-1849), Boston, Massachusetts, 1793-1813. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, chestnut, white pine, brass, iron, ivory, textile. 53.091.2.

9. Sideboard, attributed to John (1738-1818) and Thomas Seymour (1771-1849), Boston, Massachusetts, 1805-1815. Mahogany, rosewood, white pine, Australian she-oak (casuarina), mahogany veneer, satinwood veneer, ivory, silver, brass. Gift of Mrs. J. Philip Walker, 85.018.

The late 18th century saw the development of more specialized domestic spaces for eating and formal gatherings, such as dining rooms, and cabinetmakers created new furniture designs to fill these spaces. Sideboards for the dining room, such as these two early Neoclassical examples, held a variety of tableware, including cutlery, napkins, and serving dishes. Sideboards were sometimes made to be paired with a cellaret—a receptacle for holding bottles of wine—which was placed under the large central opening between the front legs, such as in example no. 9.

Both of these examples are attributed to Boston cabinetmakers John and Thomas Seymour. No. 8 possesses the same drawer construction as the Seymour-attributed desk (no. 7), and its ivory-outlined keyholes are characteristic of furniture produced by the Seymour shop. No. 9 also belongs to a group of similar sideboards, all with serpentine (or s-curved) fronts and veneer paneled drawer fronts, attributed to the Seymours. The careful arrangement of the crotch-mahogany veneers on no. 8 (veneer cut from wood at the juncture of two branches) and the beautiful contrasting colored veneers on no. 9 are also indicative of the high quality work produced by the Seymour shop.



10. Secrétaire à abattant, attributed to George Archbald (1790-1870), Boston, Massachusetts, 1830-1840. Mahogany, Spanish cedar, brass, steel, leather, gilding, marble. Museum Collections Fund, 2017.25.

This *secrétaire à abattant* or fall-front desk, a form associated with the work of French cabinetmakers, is attributed to George Archbald (1790-1870), who was active in Boston between 1825 and 1843. The *secrétaire à abattant's* name derives from its fall-front writing surface that closes flat to the surface of the case. Its massive volume and architectural design, with full-length pilasters or columns, capitals with carved lotus-forms, and cornice molding with carved egg-and-dart motifs, reflects the late Classical or Empire style, which was inspired by Greco-Roman design. The cabinetmaker's selection of exotic, imported woods demonstrate their use on showy, yet practical pieces of household furniture. Its figured mahogany, use of aromatic Spanish cedar as a secondary wood, and original marble top create a rich and handsome harmony of materials.

