

Kaila K. Temple
Summer Fellowship Program 2018
Object Study
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“The Largest and Most Fashionable Assortment”: a c. 1840 Stand and the Furniture and Feather Warehouse of John G. Creagh

HD 2017.23 is at first glance a rather diminutive and unassuming stand to the modern eye. The overall impression of this object is one of usefulness: two drawers to store belongings, and a flat surface on which to place various items, accompanied by understated and uncomplicated ornamentation. One must only open the lower drawer to find the details of this stand that allude to the beginnings of its life in John G. Creagh’s Springfield furniture warehouse, as well as the tastes and shopping experience of its original owners. A closer investigation of this piece reveals a connection to larger concepts of style and fashionability, as well as the changing landscape of commerce in mid nineteenth-century America.

The overall form of this stand demonstrates the subtle elegance of the American Empire style, drawing inspiration from the classical world. This classical influence is hinted at in the turned ribs at the top of the legs, which if the leg is taken as a column of sorts, serves as an abstraction of a capital. These gently swelling legs were likely turned on a lathe, an inexpensive and easy way to add details such as the ribs and bowling pin-like feet. This piece is somewhat more restrained and whimsical compared to some examples of the American Empire style, which frequently features details such as hairy paw feet and more overtly classical imagery.¹ The front of this stand is decorated with an eye to refinement and restraint. The front of the stand, as well as the drawer fronts, are decorated with a

¹ Louise Ade Boger, *The Complete Guide to Furniture Styles* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969). 362.

Kaila K. Temple
Summer Fellowship Program 2018
Object Study
07/03/2018

mahogany veneer, with the rest of the piece stained to match. At the time this stand was made, a taste for mahogany had dominated fashionable American furniture for over fifty years. The use of veneer on the drawer fronts of a relatively plain and simple stand speaks to the technological innovations of the nineteenth century that enabled veneers of expensive and exotic woods to be produced with greater economy and ease than before.² The veneer applied to this piece is highly figured, aligned so that the pattern of the grain continues across both drawers. Figured veneered had grown to replace carving as the primary mode of decoration for furniture in the early nineteenth century and serves as the main ornament of this stand.³

The bottoms of the legs display significant patterns of wear, far more than the single original back leg, possibly from repeated bumps and brushes with years' worth of errant feet.⁴ There are several large chips in the base of both legs, and there are numerous scratches of various depths, many darkened with age. It is interesting to note that the legs are made of basswood, an American hardwood that is not known for its sturdiness and resistance to wear and decay.⁵ This choice in wood may account for concentration and severity of wear to the base of the legs. The well-worn drawer pulls, smooth with a well-developed patina from over a century of hands, are made of solid mahogany to match the

² Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *American Furniture: 1650 to the Present* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018). 134.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The proper left rear leg has been replaced and stained to match the rest of the piece

⁵ R. Bruce Hoadley, *Understanding Wood: A Craftsmans Guide to Wood Technology* (Newton, CT: Taunton., 1980). 36 ; wood identified by Bruce Hoadley; "Curator Worksheet" in object file of *Stand*, c. 1840, 28 in x 20 in x 17 3/4 in., Historic Deerfield Inc., HD 2017.13

Kaila K. Temple
Summer Fellowship Program 2018
Object Study
07/03/2018

veneer. The yellow-poplar top of this stand shows similar evidence of use, with some cracking, and chipping at the front edge.⁶

When the drawers are opened and removed from the stand, one can begin to unravel the story of John G. Creagh and his warehouse. The case of the stand is glued and nailed together, with evidence of at least two eras of glue application and nails, judging by the yellowing of the glue and the shininess of the nails. The drawers are constructed from four pieces of wood, attached by dovetails at the front and back. The drawer sides are yellow-poplar, while the fronts concealed by the veneer are white pine.⁷ The dovetails at the front of the drawers are executed with a fineness that indicates a higher level of cabinetmaking skill on the part of the craftsman. The dovetails at the back of the drawers are somewhat less fine, perhaps because of how infrequently they would be seen. The dovetail construction used throughout yields a very sturdy set of drawers, free of any structural nails or glue. The insides and sides of the drawers are left unfinished, while the character of the assortment of woods used to construct the stand is concealed by the reddish varnish that colors the piece. The diversity of wood matters little in terms of aesthetics when each piece is stained to match, demonstrating a prioritization of the external appearance of the piece.

The lower drawer contains a yellowed printed label pasted to the bottom of the drawer. This label reads:

⁶ Wood identified by Bruce Hoadley; "Curator Worksheet" in object file of *Stand*, c. 1840, 28 in x 20 in x 17 3/4 in., Historic Deerfield Inc., HD 2017.13

⁷ Wood identified by Bruce Hoadley; *Ibid.*

Kaila K. Temple
Summer Fellowship Program 2018
Object Study
07/03/2018

JOHN G. CREAGH
WHOLESALE AND RETAIL DEALER IN
CABINET FURNITURE,
CHAIRS, LOOKING GLASSES'
MATTRESS FEATHERS, &
NOS. 5 AND 6, FOUNTAIN ROW,
MAIN STREET--- OPPOSITE THE HAMPDEN HOUSE

From this label, we can infer that like many of the other large furniture warehouses that arose during this period, Creagh was selling furniture possibly made by both himself and others.⁸ In the *Springfield Republican*, Creagh does advertise “furniture, chairs, and looking glasses”, as well as “live geese feathers” at his shop in nos. 5 and 6, Fountain Row.⁹ Further investigation into the record of Creagh and his business in the newspaper reveals that he was previously partnered with a Mr. Calvin Hunter at one point in 1840, a partnership which was “dissolved by mutual consent” in May of 1840, causing him to move to the location in Fountain Street.¹⁰ This change in location is reflected in the label in this piece, dating the stand to 1840 at the earliest. This date is further supported by an unrelated receipt from Creagh’s warehouse (HD 2018.1), which bears the address in Fountain Street. An earlier advertisement from March of 1839 declares “better times since the fire”.¹¹ This advertisement marks the reopening of Creagh’s earlier warehouse on Main Street that burned in November of 1838. In the account of the fire, Creagh is described as a

⁸ Fitzgerald, *American Furniture*, 136.

⁹ *Springfield Republican*, October 3, 1840, accessed July 3, 2018, America's Historical Newspapers.

¹⁰ *Springfield Republican*, May 2, 1840. Accessed July 3, 2018. America's Historical Newspapers.

¹¹ *Springfield Republican*, March 9, 1839. Accessed July 3, 2018. America's Historical Newspapers.

Kaila K. Temple
Summer Fellowship Program 2018
Object Study
07/03/2018

cabinetmaker, and it is noted that he lost tools in the conflagration.¹² It is impossible to know if this stand was made by Creagh or another cabinetmaker, but it is clear from the presence of his label that he stood by its quality and fashionability, attributes highlighted in his advertisements.¹³

With the ability to trace such a rich history of the seller through the label found in this stand, as well as the receipt in Historic Deerfield's collection, this piece can be interpreted in a variety of exhibition contexts relating to the landscape of commerce, shopping and fashionability in the late Federal period. Creagh's own story serves as an excellent example of the rapidly changing commercial environments enabled by technological and infrastructural advances in the movement of goods across larger geographic areas. After the reopening of his warehouse and dissolution of his partnership with Calvin Hunter, Creagh appears to begin his new business venture optimistically, advertising both quality and competitive prices, as well as his new stock of goose feathers.¹⁴ However, by December of 1840, Creagh seeks subscribers to the tune of "a few hundred dollars", promising the consumer that they will "get their money's worth" if they assist in liquidating what would appear to be an excess of stock.¹⁵ In January of 1841, under

¹² *Springfield Republican*, November 17, 1838. Accessed July 3, 2018. America's Historical Newspapers.

¹³ *Springfield Republican*, March 9, 1839. Accessed July 3, 2018. America's Historical Newspapers.

¹⁴ *Springfield Republican*, October 3, 1840. Accessed July 3, 2018. America's Historical Newspapers.

¹⁵ *Springfield Republican*, December 19, 1840. Accessed July 3, 2018. America's Historical Newspapers.

Kaila K. Temple
Summer Fellowship Program 2018
Object Study
07/03/2018

the heading of “hard times”, Creagh calls for a settling of accounts.¹⁶ By May of the same year, he advertises his wares a “cheaper than ever” stressing the variety of his stock and its low price. He also notes the availability of coffins at his warehouse, a notably steady stream of income for a cabinetmaker.¹⁷ However, all these notices to public of the bargains to be had seem to have been distributed in vain, as in January of 1842, Creagh offers his store in Fountain Row, with “possession given immediately” to the new tenant.¹⁸

Creagh’s story and this stand could be used in a number of exhibitions, including:

- The warehouse shopping experience in the mid-nineteenth century
- Refinement and fashionability for the price-conscious middle class
- The landscape of commerce in late Federal Springfield, MA
- Vernacular examples of Late Empire furniture

A promising concept from this list of possible exhibit themes is the experience of warehouse shopping in the mid-nineteenth century. The objects used in such an exhibit could be determined through the examination of warehouse advertisements like Creagh’s, assembled with duplicates and variety among groups of objects. Objects could be arranged in such a way to appeal to a shopper, rather than for artistic appreciation. The atmosphere could be enhanced through the use of props such as crates and packing materials, as well as large displays of newspaper ads used in the curation of the exhibit. This exhibit would show the modern viewer the availability of goods in regional urban centers, and could

¹⁶ *Springfield Republican*, January 16, 1841. Accessed July 3, 2018. America's Historical Newspapers

¹⁷ *Springfield Republican*, May 29, 1841. Accessed July 3, 2018. America's Historical Newspapers.

¹⁸ *Springfield Republican*, January 22, 1842. Accessed July 3, 2018. America's Historical Newspapers.

Kaila K. Temple
Summer Fellowship Program 2018
Object Study
07/03/2018

provide numerous opportunities to interpret the larger technological advances and infrastructure developments that allow for the rapidly moving and competitive commercial landscape that Creagh participated in and ultimately failed in. This exhibit would also allow a focus on more mundane, middle class objects, and provide visitors with a point of contact to a past they may be able to relate to. A contrast could be drawn between the warehouses of businessmen like Creagh and the high style furniture warehouses of major cities such as Boston.

Within this exhibit, Creagh's stand could be interpreted a number of ways. A label that effectively places this object within the context of the exhibition might read:

This stand was sold by John G. Creagh of Springfield, Massachusetts, as evidenced by his label in the bottom drawer. Creagh advertised fashionable and affordable furniture, which is reflected in the construction and decoration of this piece. The fronts of the drawers are decorated with mahogany veneer, a cost-effective method of applying exotic decorative woods. The structure of the stand is comprised of four different varieties of wood, stained to match. This stand was intended to give off a sense of refinement to the customer and viewer, concealing cost-saving adaptations. With fashionable items available at a lower cost, the consumer could buy more pieces, ideally all from the same warehouse. Ultimately, Creagh was unable to generate much profit using this approach, closing his doors in 1842 after only two years in business on his own.

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Kaila K. Temple
Summer Fellowship Program 2018
Object Study
07/03/2018

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Appendix: Newspaper Clippings in Order of Date

DESTRUCTIVE FIRE.

About 4 o'clock, on the morning of the 10th, a fire commenced in Capt. Henry Sargeant's building, (opposite the Springfield Hotel,) occupied by himself, Mr. E. Hanum and Mr. S. B. Hodgett. Mr. S. Smith, who managed the watch department in Mr. Sargeant's Shop, and slept in one of the chambers, was awakened by the smoke—threw on his cloak only, and gave the alarm. He was unable to return to his chamber to save any of his property, which amounted to five or six hundred dollars.—When Engine No. 1 commenced operation, the building was very much on fire inside, and it was breaking out at the front windows of Hanum's Store. His dry goods, estimated at \$3,000, were all destroyed. Capt. Sargeant removed so much of his jewelry, looking glasses, &c. &c. that it is believed his insurance will cover his loss. Mr. Hodgett, who occupied two chambers as a harness and trunk shop, lost his all, including books and papers, amounting to about \$200. The building was insured for \$1000.

Before Mr. Sargeant's building fell in ruins, the brick building next, owned by Mrs. Rowland, and occupied by Maj. C. H. Mann, watchmaker, Mr. Horace Lee, Chairmaker, and Mr. John G. Creagh, Cabinet-maker, was so much on fire as to defeat all efforts to save it. The cellar contained goods of Mr. Edwards', which were all saved, without moving. Mr. Mann saved all his goods. Mr. Lee and Mr. Creagh saved a large portion of their furniture; but Mr. Lee estimates his loss at \$800, and Mr. Creagh his loss at \$600, principally in stock and tools.

Mrs. Rowland had no insurance on her building, and the loss falls hard upon the widow, as the rents were her support. It may be rebuilt for about \$1000.

Mrs. Edwards' fire-proof store on the south, and Mr. Brewer's and Reynolds & Morris's fire-proof building on the north, stood the fire without injury.

The fire is supposed to have originated in the lower part of the building, back of the front stairs, but from what cause it is unknown.

While the firemen and many of our citizens were laboring faithfully for hours, to master the flames, quite too many lazy fellows were calmly looking on, or stuffing their skins with Mr. Edwards' crackers and wine, which he kindly offered for refreshment to those who better deserved it.

It is many years since so destructive a fire has occurred in this town; and we trust that this calamity will have one good effect—to make us better prepared to manage a fire hereafter.

Kaila K. Temple
Summer Fellowship Program 2018
Object Study
07/03/2018

Better times since the Fire.
HERE WE COME AGAIN!
AT THE OLD STAND RE-
BUILT!

KNOWN AS THE

Springfield Furniture
WARE-HOUSE,
with the largest and best assort-
ment of

FURNITURE AND CHAIRS,
ever offered in this place—together with a
splendid assortment of
LOOKING GLASSES,
OF ALL SIZES.

Among his Furniture may be found all
the following articles, viz.

Sofas, Sideboards and Lockers of every de-
scription;
Secretaries and Book Cases, Dressing,
French and plain Bureaus;
Dining, Centre, Tea, Pier, Card and Work
Tables;
Feathers; Curled Hair, Moss and Straw
Mattresses;
Dressing Boxes, Portable Desks, Wash
Stands of every description;

Together with every other article in his line.

Having the best of workmen in his em-
ploy, he feels warranted in saying, that his
work shall be made in elegant style, and of
the best of materials.

Persons wishing to purchase first rate
work, will do well to give him a call and
see for themselves before purchasing else-
where, as all the above, together with a
great variety of articles will be sold cheap
for cash.

Muhogany, Glue and Varnish constantly
for sale.

Most kinds of Lumber taken in payment
for work.

Don't forget the place—Directly opposite
the Springfield Hotel, Main street.

JOHN G. CREAGH.
Springfield, Feb. 1839. 58

NOTICE.

THE Copartnership heretofore existing between **CREAGH & HUNTER**, is this day dissolved by mutual consent. All persons indebted to the late firm of Creagh & Hunter, are requested to make immediate payment to John G. Creagh, who is duly authorised to settle the accounts of said firm,

**JOHN G. CREAGH,
CALVIN HUNTER,**

Springfield, April 18.

N. B. The business will for the future be continued at the old stand, opposite Springfield Hotel, by **JOHN G. CREAGH.**
Springfield, May 2, 1840. 18

REMOVAL.

JOHN G. CREAGH

HAS removed his **FURNITURE AND FEATHER WARE-HOUSE** to

**NO'S. 5 & 6
FOUNTAIN ROW,**

Where may be found the largest and most fashionable assortment of

**FURNITURE, CHAIRS, AND
LOOKING-GLASSES,**

Together with a prime lot of

Live Geese Feathers,

That can be found in this Town or County, all of which will be sold at a less price for Cash than at any other store in town, considering the quality. Don't forget the place, in the New Building,

OPPOSITE THE FOUNTAIN.

Sept. 19.

38

Wanted Immediately,

BY the subscriber, a few thousand or even a few hundred dollars in the Ready Cash, in Bills of good Banks, or even Gold or Silver will not be objected to, in exchange for *Furniture, Chairs, Looking-Glasses, and Feathers.*

at very reduced prices considering the exchange.

The subscriber after returning his very grateful acknowledgements for the very liberal patronage heretofore extended to him, at the same time he would assure all in want of any articles in his line that as his facilities for manufacturing and otherwise obtaining articles of Furniture are such, that he will be able to sell better articles at a less price than they can procure them at any other similar establishment in this town or county. As it is well known that I keep the largest and best assortment of any in my line of business in this place, I need only say that if you will call with the Cash in your pocket, at the Ware House of the subscriber,

**NO'S. 5 & 6,
FOUNTAIN ROW,**

Opposite the Hampden House,

Where you will find a larger assortment than was ever before seen in this Town or County. Don't forget the place, in the New Block No's. 5 and 6, is where you can get your money's worth. **JOHN G. CREAGH.**

P. S. Mahogany, Glue, and Varnish, constantly on hand and for sale as usual. Terms Cash, and prices to correspond, for sale as above.

October 24

431f

HARD TIMES.

NOW is the time to save cost. All persons whose Notes and Accounts are due the subscriber, are requested to call and settle the same *forthwith*, in order to save paying the Lawyers' and Constables' fees. No mistake.

JOHN G. CREAGH.

Springfield, Jan. 16, 1841.

55

CHEAPER THAN EVER.

JUST received, a splendid assortment of Sofas, Card and Work Tables, which together with his usual large assortment of all kinds of furniture, Chairs and Looking Glasses, makes the best selection ever before offered in this town.

Also, best quality Live Geese Feathers, all of which will be sold *cheaper* for Cash than can be bought at any other place in town.

Remember the place, No's. 5 and 6, Fountain Row, at

JOHN G. CREAGH'S.

P. S. Ready made *Coffins* on hand as usual.
Springfield, March 6, 1841.

tf 62



TO RENT, AND POSSESSION GIVEN IMMEDIATELY.—

A first rate store on Fountain Row. This store is one of the best stands for any kind of business in town. Inquire at this office, or of

Jan 16 1841

JOHN G. CREAGH.