

On the Trail of John Shearer

By Betsy Davison and Jim Glass

The July PATINA meeting featured an excellent presentation on cabinetmaker John Shearer who worked in the mid-Atlantic region before and after the turn of the 19th century. For the past several years Betsy Davison has sought to extend knowledge about Shearer and his work through careful review of surviving furniture scattered in museum and private collections. Because Shearer's work is both idiosyncratic and representative of uniquely American expression the urge to expand knowledge about him is compelling. Yet, other than intriguing inscriptions Shearer left on the furniture he crafted evidence of his life remains elusive.

Some information about Shearer has been published based largely on surviving case goods and tables he signed or left inscriptions on between 1798 and 1818. Some examples of Shearer's work contain inscriptions he is thought to have left claiming to be from Edinburgh, Scotland 1775. Later examples include markings indicating he worked from Martinsburg. One surviving example in the collection of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) in Winston-Salem, NC is signed in 20 places. Other furniture either signed or attributed to Shearer can be found in Colonial Williamsburg, and in private collections. Efforts to locate Shearer on tax lists, census records, church rolls, etc. have so far failed to document his whereabouts in either Scotland or America.

Shearer left other inscriptions and papers concealed inside furniture that reflect "Tory" persuasions. One such example apparently applauds the 1814 burning of the capital by British troops. The picture below is of a desk in a private collection.



This desk is currently on loan and on display at the new Museum of the Shenandoah Valley in Winchester, VA. Shearer signed and dated the desk 1818. The inlay on the

fall board features a Scottish thistle, Masonic symbols and a bust in a memorial shaped urn. Underneath the bust are the words: "*Nemo me impune lacessit by a true North Britain.*" "*Nemo me impune lacessit*" means "No one provokes me with impunity," the motto for the Order of the Thistle, the highest honor in Scotland and second only in precedence to the English Order of the Garter. It is unclear who the desk was made for as the name on the fall board has faded and he did not write the name on the inside.

Shearers work represents unique and distinctive examples of American backcountry furniture at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. PATINA members may recall Wendell Garrett's presentation outlining characteristics of American furniture of this period. In Garrett's view, distinctive American styles emerged from a confluence of influences, chiefly the abundance of native hardwood, the need to create durable furniture suited to country living, and incorporation of continental or British styles. In many respects John Shearer and his work are quintessentially American. Shearer himself was likely a product of the British apprenticeship system that produced the bulk of early American craftsmen. Judging the complexity of his design and the skill he demonstrated in executing finer features of his work leave no doubt Shearer was a master joiner and cabinetmaker.

Typical characteristics of Shearer's desks and chests furniture include:

- Used primarily walnut, although did work in cherry a bit and some mahogany.
- Pieces are solid, not veneered. In other words, his serpentine fronts are carved from the solid. His pieces are typically quite heavy.
- Many pieces exhibit an M-shaped serpentine front with blocked ends.
- Graduated drawer sizes, getting larger as you move down the case.
- Often a vertical position of pulls, possibly to enhance the verticality of the piece.
- Large exuberant ogee bracket feet or unusual claw and ball feet with foreshortened cabriole legs.
- Fluted corner columns appear on many pieces while other examples incorporate quarter columns with cascading style incorporating shag, stopped fluting, and geometric patterns resembling fish scales or bird feathers.
- Shell carvings adorning some examples resemble classic northeastern style but in folksy manner. Shell sections alternate convex and concave folds unlike earlier colonial examples from Massachusetts and Rhode Island.
- "Federal knots" (Shearer's words) have appeared as inlay, carved/pierced on the lopers of desks and on the aprons of some pier tables. The federal knot inlaid on case goods and small tables and various maritime symbols frequently found on

Shearer signed pieces always executed in fine detail, as is inland thistle suggestive of his presumed Scots heritage.



- Drawers rest upon a mortised frame that entirely encircles the inside of the carcass of the piece. Dust covers are not used.
- Feet are reinforced by wrought iron brackets.

Tables attributed to Shearer typically have long tapered legs and tall spade feet carved from the leg and not attached separately. Aprons are shaped and in some cases pierced. Top is secured to frame with screws.

Shearer is an important figure representative of immigrant craftsman whose work adapted to the realities and opportunities of federal period furniture making. Surviving examples of his work suggest he was very highly skilled as evidenced by fine interior design of his desks.



Inscriptions concealed inside one desk suggest Shearer was occasionally disappointed in the regard which his customers held for him. Shearer used the inside of a cabinet to hide an inscription revealing his contempt for a customer he referred to as “the meanest man in Loudon County” presumably because he felt underpaid or underappreciated.

PATINA members with information about John Shearer are encouraged to contact Betsy Davison BetsyDavison@aol.com who continues to assemble data on Shearer and his work.

Other resources for information about John Shearer include:

The classic work on the artisan is a May 1979 article by John J. Snyder Jr., "John Shearer, Joiner of Martinsburgh" in volume V of the Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts.

The Museum of the Shenandoah Valley is at 901 Amherst Street, Winchester, Va., and is open Tuesday through Friday 10 am to 4 pm; The Glen Burnie Historic House & Gardens are open annually from March 1 through November 30. For information, 540-662-1473 or www.shenandoahmuseum.org

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<http://www.chipstone.org/SpecialProjects/CWSF/cwsf-27a.html>