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REPORT

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On Wednesday, March 26, 2014, I examined a walnut high chest of drawers probably made between 1750 and 1775 in the coastal region between Newport, Rhode Island, and Stonington, Connecticut. This report summarizes my opinions regarding the table and its condition.

The walnut high chest uses white pine extensively as a secondary wood except for cherry top and bottom boards of the upper case. These woods are common in furniture made throughout southern New England. Much more specific regional traits occur as design features of the legs and of the skirt. The pointed feet of the cabriole legs recall many pieces of furniture made in Newport. Similarly, construction of the legs with square tenons at the top, intended to be glued in place in the corners of the lower case represents Rhode Island construction. Unlike lower cases assembled with mortise and tenon joints, these Rhode Island-type lower cases employ dovetails in the corners. The leg tenons fit into shallow channels cut into the inside corners of the case sides; glue blocks stacked around the tenons hold the legs firmly in place. Another Rhode Island feature is attachment of the waist- or mid-moldings to the base of the upper case rather than to the top of the lower.

Design of the skirt, being an upside down fleur-de-lis device, is associated specifically with Stonington on the basis of a high chest of drawers signed "Stonington" and related furniture with solid area provenances.

All drawer bottoms are nailed to the underside of the drawer sides, drawer front, and drawer back. This construction was commonly used in early-eighteenth-century drawers. In time, it was replaced by techniques in which drawer bottoms either were nailed within rabbets cut on the underside with thin strips of wood covering the nail heads, or slid in from the rear in channels cut near the bottom edges of the drawer sides. In both instances, the technique eliminated the possibility that the nail heads might dig channels into the drawer blades as the drawers were slid in and out. Although the early technique exists on this high chest, care must be taken not to assume an early date for its manufacture on that basis. Certain features could remain in use for decades after they had largely disappeared elsewhere.

The brasses appear to be the first, which makes them good evidence for dating the high chest. One was removed from the proper left side of the uppermost full-width drawer in the upper case. There were no extraneous marks, and clear witness marks affirmed

installation of this brass. One small top drawer shows where holes for the brass posts were originally drilled in a wrong location. Similarly, an escutcheon plate (on the long drawer of the lower case) was originally mounted about a half-inch lower than it is now—in line with the drawer pulls on each side. Layout mistakes such as these occasionally occur in early furniture and suggest that the maker was not very familiar with all aspects of making such a complex piece of furniture. Another layout mistake occurred when the maker cut open mortises for a central drawer slide for the top center drawer of the upper case. That drawer runs on side runners attached to the vertical dividers that create the small top drawer cavities on each side, thus rendering a center drawer runner (as exists in the lower case) unnecessary. Nothing appears to have ever occupied these open mortises.

Another, more complex construction anomaly occurs in the framing of the upper case. The case sides are dovetailed into the bottom board, as is normal casework, and into an upper board that spans each upper side edge. However, if that full-width board remained intact, it would have interfered with the tall center drawer that extends up into the pediment. Rather than omit the upper dovetailed board, the maker chose to cut the front half away, leaving the back half intact. He then notched the back portion of the tall center drawer sides and drawer back so that it would fit in front of and under the remaining partial-width dovetailed board. This unorthodox solution has not been observed by the author anywhere else. This solution is in keeping with the other construction errors noted in this high chest. It suggests that this large case piece was among the earlier ones this anonymous maker executed.

A feature of this maker's work worth noting is the manner in which he dressed (i.e., smoothed or finished) the wood he used. All drawer sides, for example, were smoothed on the inside, where they were seen, but were left quite rough on the outsides, showing water-powered and hand saw marks.

Consistency of inside and outside tool use and marks confirms that the two cases belong together. This evidence is important because the bottom of the upper case exhibits some reworking. The dovetail pins (cut from the ends of the case sides) appear to have a stain on them, typically used to cover freshly cut wood. The bottom board of the case looks as if it has been reattached to these dovetail pins: the dovetails are somewhat open and show lots of glue, and wire nails reinforce the dovetail joint. Such evidence might call into question the integrity of the two cases (a "marriage"), but eccentricities of these cases match each other. Another possible alteration might have been elimination of a large drawer to reduce the overall height of the high chest. However, the bottom drawer of the upper case is deep enough that another drawer below would have been too deep, assuming the maker continued the "graduated" increase in drawer heights. Also, the present bottom drawer cannot have had another below it because the bottom board of the upper case abuts the side board, rather than shows a dovetailed channel, as do all of the drawer blades above.

The back boards and "roof" of the pediment have been painted black, which is not an original treatment. Despite the added paint, which was often done to hide repairs and

alterations, these back boards and roof appear to be original. Of note, the oxidized color of the unpainted inside surfaces of the roof matches adjacent wood surfaces.

The tips of each rear leg have broken off. The slightly jagged seam of one reglued tip (the proper left rear leg) indicates that the original wood was reattached. The seam of the other leg tip looks straight, indicating that the tip is a replacement, although the grain and color match is very good. Other finely executed repairs to drawer lips may be found at several sites. These kinds of repairs represent normal wear and tear. One knee bracket (the side bracket of the proper left front leg) is a replacement. The other knee brackets have been reglued but appear to be original. The central plinth and turned and carved finial above are replacements.