

Connecticut Valley Furniture, 1750-1800



by Alice K. Kugelman and Thomas P. Kugelman



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In the years 1750 to 1790 the Connecticut Valley experienced a golden age of furniture design and production. Four different aesthetic styles emerged concurrently, with three originating in the towns of Wethersfield, East Windsor, and Colchester, in what was then Hartford County, Connecticut, and the fourth in the Springfield-Northampton area of Massachusetts. While the styles were influenced in some ways by antecedents from elsewhere in the colonies, each came about, evolved, and spread according to the personality and gifts of the cabinetmakers, the social and economic character of the towns, and a host of other factors.

While books and articles have been written on the furniture of the three Hartford County towns, there had been no overarching study that made a thorough examination of the objects, cabinet shops, and shop traditions of these communities. A new book, *Connecticut Valley Furniture by Eliphalet Chapin and His Contemporaries 1750-1800*, and a companion exhibition, showcase the results of the Hartford Case Furniture Survey (HCFS), a fourteen year project we undertook in collaboration with furniture consultant Robert Lionetti. We examined nearly 500 pieces of case furniture made in the Lower Connecticut River Valley, in the second half of the eighteenth century, in the area between Middletown, Connecticut, and Northampton, Massachusetts.

The purpose of the project was to learn who the cabinetmakers were, where they worked, and how to identify the objects they made so that attributions can be given with greater confidence. In addition to recording data, 8,000 photographs of design and construction details were taken for purposes of reference and comparison. Case furniture forms — high chests, dressing tables, desks, desks and bookcases, chest-on-chests, and bureaus — were selected for study because they reveal more of the cabinetmakers' idiosyncratic shop techniques and contain hidden surfaces where inscriptions might be discovered.

Bonnet-top high chest, Wethersfield, 1770-1790. Cherry and birch with eastern white pine. H. 81 3/4, W. 37 1/4, D. 20 1/8, in. Probably first owned by Daniel and Rhoda (Welles) Willard. Privately owned. Photography by Helga Studio. The Wethersfield style emphasizes form and proportion over surface decoration.



Scalloped-top tea table, Wethersfield, 1760–1780. Cherry. H. 27, W. 32, D. 20 5/8 in. Probably first owned by Thomas and Abigail (Porter) Belden. Courtesy Webb-Deane Stevens Museum; photography courtesy Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. The design of the top relates to a number of dressing tables made in different shops in the region. George Washington and John Adams may have gathered around a table such as this one during one of their visits.

The information collected was analyzed by sorting the furniture into groups that define shops or shop traditions and creating a system for classifying them. This process took into consideration such factors as form, date range, validated histories of ownership, and physical evidence. The advantage of this system is that a shop, or shop tradition, can be defined by constellations of significant design and construction features, even though the name of the cabinetmaker or town of origin might be unknown.

The book will aid readers in attributing furniture by providing comparisons based not only on the usual design and decoration, but on construction features as well. Each furniture group has a list of the specific design and construction characteristics that identify it; many individual entries have lists of singular features as well. This level of detail is new ground for furniture study, and invites users to look more closely at objects in order to understand their myriad components and relationships. In this sense, the book functions like a bird guide that provides distinguishing features for each species.

Connecticut Valley Furniture

By 1750 Connecticut Valley cabinetmakers had more than a century of strong shop traditions behind them.¹ For example, the first settlers of Windsor (which included East Windsor) in 1635 included dozens of woodworkers, all products of a craft tradition dating back to the Middle Ages. This tradition was based on the English guild system involving strict training, rigorous technical standards, and a tight apprenticeship system where close family and professional ties counted.

While this explains the Connecticut Valley craft tradition of workmanship, it doesn't account for the creativity of design, nor does it explain why a town would embrace a new style as its own and keep it for several decades. Social historians point to a truculent independence of spirit that frequently led colonists to break away from existing church-led towns and establish new parishes or towns with their own way of doing things. Perhaps that same independent spirit led Eliphalet Chapin in East Windsor and an as-yet-unidentified master in Colchester to create new styles that were influenced by, but not in lockstep with, the fashions in Philadelphia and Newport. Similarly, in Wethersfield, cabinetmakers took a Boston-area aesthetic, which they modified and refined for over half a century.

Wethersfield Style

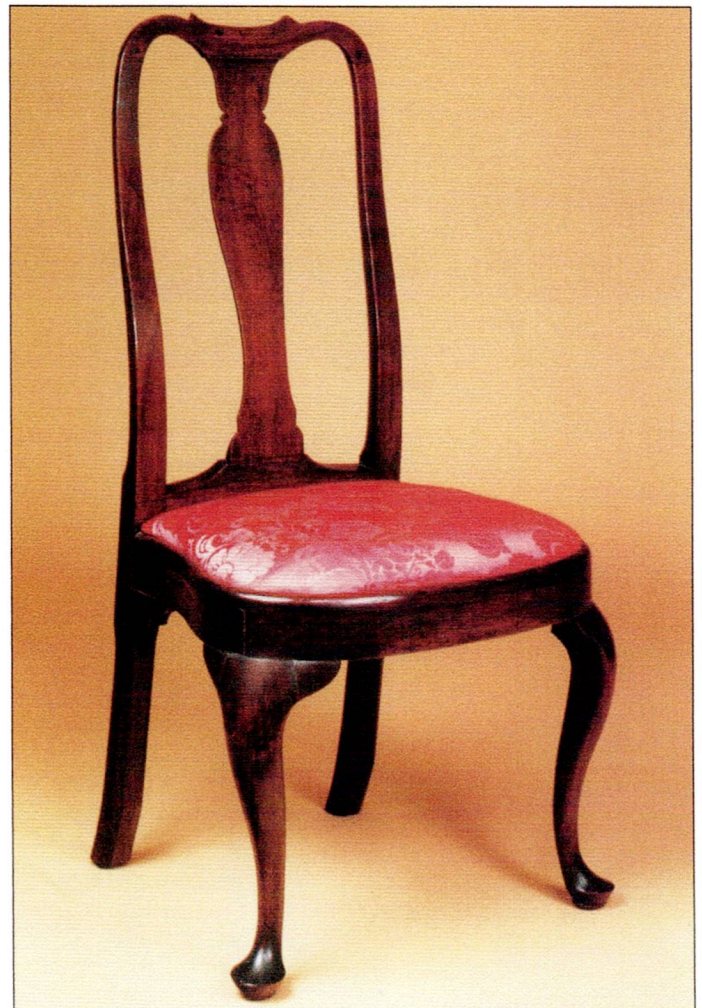
The Wethersfield Queen Anne style, the earliest of Hartford County's golden age, originated around 1730 when William Manley

Side chair, Wethersfield, 1750–1760. Mahogany with eastern white pine. H. 41, W. 19 3/4, D. 17 in. Possibly first owned by Joseph and Mehitable (Nott) Webb. Privately owned. Photography by Helga Studio. The clean lines and flow of the curves on this chair are uninterrupted by stretchers; the back is tall, with a narrow splat.

(1703–1787) arrived from Charlestown, Massachusetts. Fifteen years later he moved to Windsor, and from 1750 to 1770 the highly successful Wethersfield style, introduced by Manley, dominated not only these two towns but also the adjacent region between Middletown and Suffield. It reached its zenith in the 1770s and 1780s, in bonnet-top high chests and scalloped-top dressing tables. While some of the cabinetmakers' names are known, the vast majority remain anonymous.

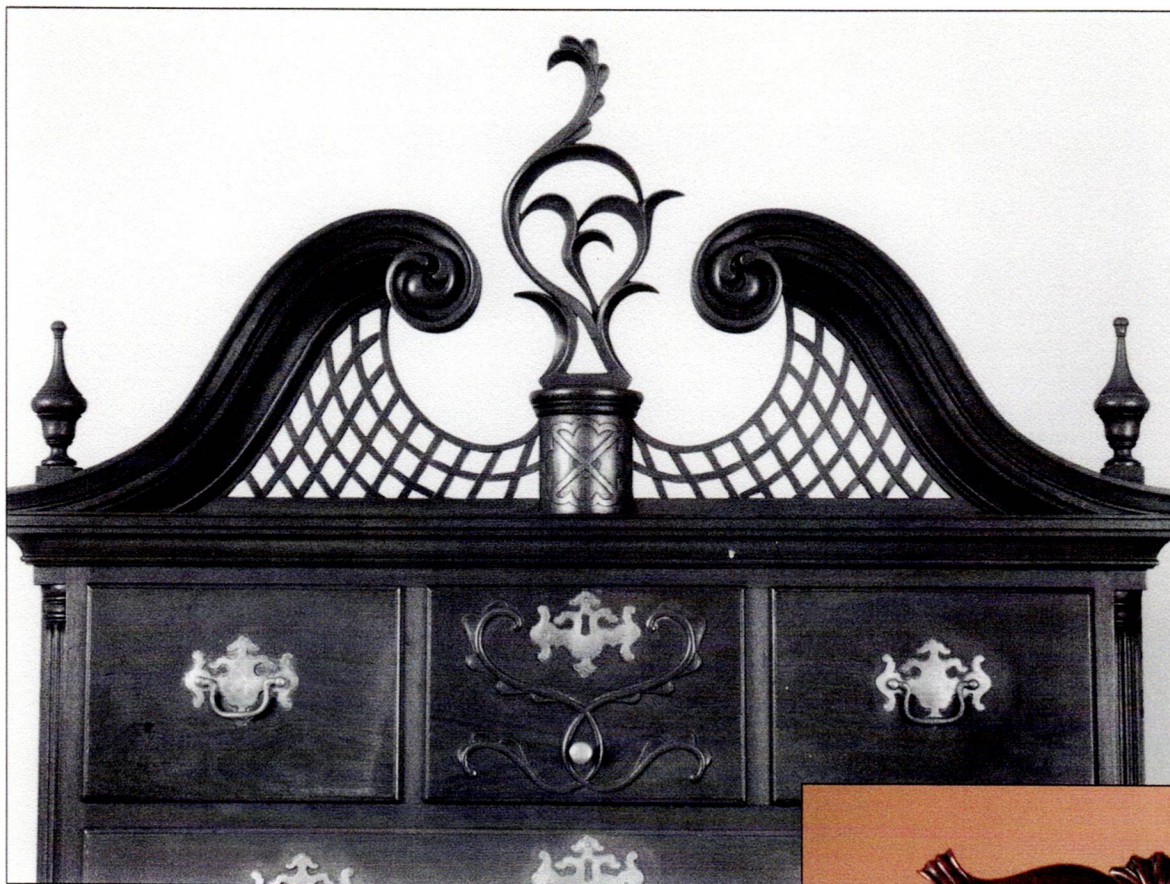
Wethersfield, like East Windsor and Colchester, prospered from agriculture and trade and, as a result, was a town of urbane sophistication and political influence. Taking advantage of its location on the inland route between Boston and New York, the parlors of prominent patriots Silas Deane (1737–1789) and Joseph Webb (1727–1761) functioned as salons or “diplomatic reception rooms,” where George Washington and John Adams both paid multiple visits.

The Wethersfield style is characterized by forms based on cyma curves that vary throughout a piece, from scalloping to sweeping S-curves. These may be seen as body curves: positives, negatives, and voids that provide specific human anatomical silhouettes. They are sensuous and feminine. Surface decoration and carving are minimal and limited to shells or a four-lobed pinwheel device known as a fylfot, which were placed on drawer fronts or within the center plinth of a bonnet. Wethersfield took the shaping of its furniture forms to a level of sophistication that emphasized lightness, beauty, grace, and balance.





High chest with scrolled pediment, Eliphalet Chapin shop, East Windsor, ca. 1781. Cherry with eastern white pine. H. 82 1/8, W. 38 3/4, D. 18 1/2 in. Probably first owned by Chauncey and Mary (Ellsworth) Newberry. Cartouche replaced. Privately owned. Photography by David Stansbury. Chapin abstracted Philadelphia rococo ornamentation to create his signature latticework-pediment high chest with intertwined applied vines on the small drawer fronts.



Armchair, Eliphalet Chapin shop, East Windsor, 1775. Cherry with eastern white pine. H. 40 1/4, W. 23, D. 18 in. First owned by the Rev. John and Ann (Grant) Marsh. Courtesy of Connecticut Historical Society Museum; gift of Frederick K. and Margaret R. Barbour. Photography by Helga Studio. Part of a commission of thirty-one pieces made by Chapin for the wedding of the Wethersfield minister to his East Windsor bride, this piece belongs to one of the three sets of chairs included in the order.

East Windsor (Chapin) Style

In the eighteenth century East Windsor residents had a tradition of supporting talented local artisans. Clockmaker and silversmith Daniel Burnap (1759–1838) is central to the history of Connecticut clockmaking. William Verstille (1757–1803), a painter of miniature portraits; Abner Reed (1771–1866), an engraver; and architect Thomas Hayden (1745–1817) all worked there as contemporaries of Eliphalet Chapin (1741–1807) who was by far the most famous of the region's cabinetmakers. One of the major goals of the HCFS was to sort out the numerous case furniture attributions made to Chapin in the past, many with no obvious empirical basis. A native of Somers, Chapin set up shop in nearby East Windsor in 1771 after serving four years as a journeyman in Philadelphia. Leaving behind the grandiose rococo excesses of carved Philadelphia furniture, he created a unique style by abstracting a clean original design and executing it in native cherry. His case furniture, embellished with latticework pediments, fluted quarter columns, and claw-and-ball feet, shows little variation; other decorative options included either a carved shell or intertwined vines on the carved drawer fronts of his high chests. His chair inventory offered a large variety of carved splats.

Although Chapin is not known to have signed any of his furniture, the meticulous and uniform nature of his work effectively functions as a “signature.” Most of Chapin's patrons were neighbors: the Olcotts, Wolcotts, Grants, and Kings, among others, and the existence of supporting documentation for several pieces of furniture makes it possible to differentiate between pieces made in his shop and pieces whose variations indicate they were made by cabinetmakers who trained under him (this group is referred to as the Chapin school).





Colchester Style

Whereas Wethersfield furniture emphasizes form and lightness, Colchester features mass and muscle, with reflective and lively carved surface decorations. Using profits earned during the Revolution from supplying the Continental Army with cattle and other provisions, residents built large houses and furnished them with sizeable case pieces such as chest-on-chests and desks and bookcases. The boisterous nature of Colchester furniture reflects differences in the attitudes and aspirations of its residents.


Like East Windsor's Chapin style, Colchester's was probably introduced by a single cabinetmaker with a genius for design. This founding shop master has not been conclusively identified, but may be Amos Wells (1735–1802), whose working dates and longevity make him the most likely candidate. Samuel Loomis III (1748–1814), an exceptionally gifted craftsman, was too young to have been the creator of the style. Unlike the Chapin shop, where few variations were allowed, Colchester work accommodated a wide variety of construction practices within individual shops, making grouping much harder.

Like the Wethersfield style, the Colchester style had a broad geographic spread. It extended to the towns of East Haddam to the south, Hebron to the north, and Chatham to the east. Chatham (now Portland and East Hampton) was originally the eastern part of the large river port of Middletown, a place where the styles from Wethersfield and Colchester collide and overlap. In addition, a critical mass of Colchester-style furniture was made in the Berkshire Mountains of Western Massachusetts by Colchester-trained cabinetmakers, including Calvin Willey (1769–after 1830), who migrated to Lenox in the early 1790s.

Not only is it astonishing that such richness could flourish within such a small area (twenty-

Bonnet-top high chest, Colchester, 1765–1785. Cherry with eastern white pine. H. 82 1/8, W. 38, H. 19 1/4 in. Probably first owned by Epaphras and Patience Lord. Courtesy of Connecticut Historical Society Museum; gift of Frederick K. and Margaret R. Barbour. Photography by Helga Studio. Colchester-style high chests feature steeply scrolled pediments, large dissimilar carved shells on the upper and lower case drawer fronts, and different front and rear feet.

Shell-carved blockfront bureau, probably Colchester, 1765–1795. Cherry with eastern white pine, tulip poplar, and chestnut. H. 38 7/8, W. 37 1/8, D. 18 1/8 in. Privately owned. Photography courtesy of Sotheby's, Inc. One of more than a dozen Colchester-style examples of this form that have three drawers, short cabriole legs with claw-and-ball feet with scrolled returns in front, and attenuated ogee back feet.

five miles being the greatest distance between the three style centers), it is also amazing that so many of the pieces show such consistently high quality in their design and construction. All of this demonstrates that Connecticut Valley furniture can best be celebrated on its own terms rather than as a reinterpretation of better-known work from urban centers such as Boston or Newport. 

Organized by the Connecticut Historical Society Museum, Hartford, *Connecticut Valley Furniture by Eliphalet Chapin and His Contemporaries 1750–1800* opens at the Concord Museum, Concord, Massachusetts, on January 29, 2005, and at the Connecticut Historical Society Museum, Hartford, June 23 to October 27, 2005.

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Alice K. and Thomas P. Kugelmann are independent furniture scholars and co-authors with Robert Lionetti of Connecticut Valley Furniture by Eliphalet Chapin and His Contemporaries 1750–1800 (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society Museum, 2005, distributed by the University Press of New England). Contact ask_us@chs.org.

¹ Joshua W. Lane and Donald P. White III, *The Woodworkers of Windsor: A Connecticut Community of Craftsmen and their World* (Deerfield, Mass.: Historic Deerfield, Inc., 2003), 5–8.

Shell-carved blockfront desk, possibly by Calvin Willey (1769–post 1830), Lenox, Mass., 1790–1795. Cherry with eastern white pine. H. 44 7/8, W. 38, D. 19 3/4 in. Courtesy of Connecticut Historical Society Museum; gift of Frederick K. and Margaret R. Barbour. Photography by Helga Studio. A massive, masculine form, the desk has a lid that features a large central concave shell topping a recess flanked by convex panels topped by shells, showing a Newport influence. Scrolled brackets on the ogee feet are characteristic of Colchester-style work.



DON'T MISS THE EXHIBITION

CONNECTICUT VALLEY FURNITURE BY ELIPHALET CHAPIN AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES, 1750-1800

TWO VENUES:

The Concord Museum, Concord, MA

January 29 - June 5, 2005

**The Connecticut Historical
Society Museum, Hartford, CT**

June 23 - October 30, 2005



The exhibition features the "best of the best" – from high chests and candlestands to dressing tables and side chairs. Drawn from both private and public collections, this first-rate assemblage of well-documented examples of Connecticut Valley furniture is the culmination of a landmark project that makes a significant contribution to decorative arts scholarship and our understanding of New England life. The exhibition is a must see for collectors and scholars, not to mention museum-goers, woodworkers, antiques enthusiasts, and educators.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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