"Boston Chairs"

By RICHARD H. RANDALL, JR.

THE exact role of an American colonial city or region involved in the export of furniture has always proved elusive, though many writers have touched on this intercolonial trade. The difficulty lies, of course, in identifying the products which were mass produced and exported, most of which have disappeared or have spent years being attributed wrongly to the regions in which they were found. Yet large fortunes in coastwise trade were procured specifically from the export of furniture, some from the mass ventures like the Windsor chair trade of Philadelphia and New York, and others from canny individual enterprise, like that of Caleb Davis of Boston.

Already in 1733 the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations were perturbed by "The people of New England, being obliged to apply themselves to manufactures more than others of the plantations, who have the benefit of a better soil and warmer climate, such improvements have been lately made there in all sorts of mechanic arts, that not only scrutores, chairs and, other wooden manufactures, but hoes, axes, and other iron utensils are now exported from thence to the other plantations, which, if not prevented may be of ill consequence to the trade and manufacture of this kingdom which evil may be worthy the consideration of the British parliament."[1] The commissioners took no specific steps to curb the trade in furniture, however, and it seems to have flourished well into the nineteenth century, with such famous examples as the cargoes of the Sandersons and their partners shipped from Salem.[2] The rich break-front bookcases of Nehemiah Adams and Edmund Johnson figure among the wares of these cargoes, and several have been discovered in the south and one as far off as Capetown.[3]

Of the early eighteenth-century New England exports, one type of chair seems to have attained extraordinary popularity in the middle states. The first clue to its character and local origin is to be found in an advertisement placed in a Philadelphia paper by an enterprising upholsterer, who had arrived in Philadelphia a few years earlier in 1739. In September, 1742, he placed the following notice in the *Pennsylvania Gazette:* "Made and to be sold by Plunket Fleeson, at the easy Chair, in Chestnut-Street. Several Sorts of good Chair-frames, black and red leather Chairs, finished cheaper than any made here, or imported from Boston, and in Case of any defects, the Buyer shall have them made good; an Advantage not to be had in the buying Boston Chairs, besides the Damage they receive by the Sea . . . and all kinds of Upholsterers Work done after the best manner."[4] There is no doubt from his advertisement that a competitive "Boston chair" had somewhat disturbed Mr. Fleeson, and his quiet damnation of the imported wares was merely to promote his own "cheaper" models. However, two years later a somewhat irate Mr. Fleeson placed a second advertisement: "Plunket Fleeson, Upholsterer, at the

EDITOR'S NOTE: The author, who is an Assistant Curator in the Department of Decorative Arts, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, has recently been elected to serve as the Society's Director of Museum.

Easy-Chair, in Chestnut-Street, Philadelphia, Knowing that People have been often disappointed and impos'd upon by the Master Chair Makers in this City, to the Prejudice of his Part of that Business, by Encouraging the Importation of Boston Chairs, has ingaged, and for many Months, employed several of the best Chair-makers in the Province, to the End he might have a Sortment of Choice Walnut Chair Frames; Gives Notice that he now has a great Variety of the newest and best Fashions, ready made, whereby all Persons who want, may be supplied without Danger of Disappointment or Imposition, at the most reasonable Rates; and Maple Chairs as cheap as from Boston."[5]

A careful comparison of the two ads sheds considerable light on the type of "Boston" chair referred to. The chairs are clearly maple framed and covered with leather, specified as being red or black. They are always noted as cheap, though Fleeson first says that his are cheaper. In his second ad, however, he notes his chairs are "as cheap." His walnut and maple chairs may have been of the same model as the Boston chairs, yet the phrase "great variety of the newest and best fashions" would lead one to believe that his locally made chairs were in keeping with the latest mode in Philadelphia, which in the 1740's would have presumably been cabriole-legged Queen Anne or slat-back chairs. The price would seem to have been the chief consideration for the population of Philadelphia to have been "encouraging the importation of Boston chairs."

An examination of American eighteenth-century chairs that could have been in current fashion in Fleeson's day reveals only one type of New England chair, and its variants, that was made of maple and covered with leather. These are the rectangular-backed leather chairs, commonly called William and Mary in style, which have a bulbous front stretcher turning and Spanish feet on block-and-vase turned legs (Figs. 1-3). They come in two common types, with a rounded crest or with an undulating crest and with button feet often substituted for the Spanish ones. Their claim to be identified as the popular export commodity "Boston chairs" is reinforced by the large numbers that have turned up in modern times in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, particularly Philadelphia, New Jersey, New York and most New England states. In many cases they have been thought to be the local productions of some of these regions, yet never for any stylistic reason, but more because of their frequent occurrence. Among extant examples, most have maple frames painted black or left plain, and the seats and backs are either black, brown, red or green leather.

Their popularity, which Plunket Fleeson bemoaned, is confirmed by the British Custom records of the period.[6] In 1744 the clearances from Boston show that on individual vessels the following numbers of chairs were shipped coastwise:

For New York—5 chairs
Virginia—12 chairs
West Indies—2 dozen chairs
Philadelphia—18 leather chairs
for Maryland—2 doz. chairs
New York—12 dozen chairs
Louisburg—4 dozen chairs
Newfoundland—2 dozen chairs

The numbers may not seem large in themselves but they total up to 399 chairs on these few recorded voyages in 1744. We are fortunate in having preserved the total accounts of the British Customs

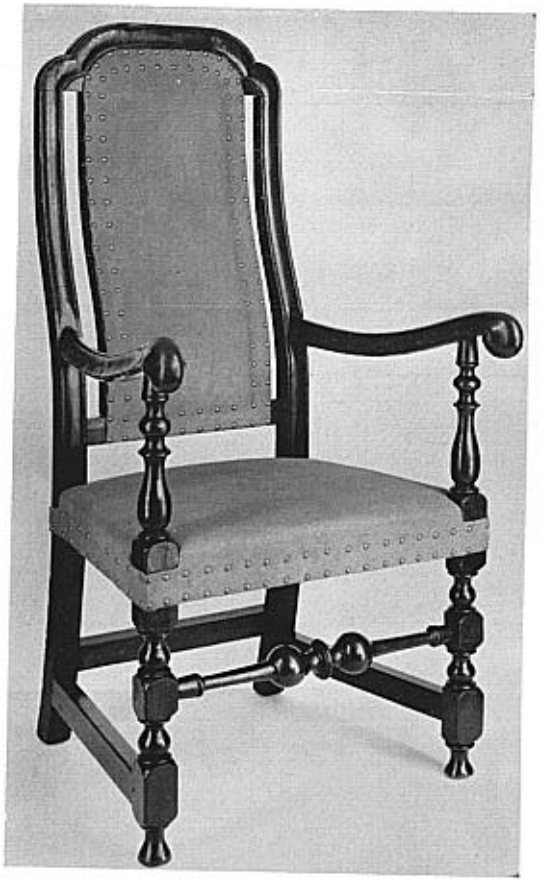

FIG. 1. "BOSTON" ARMCHAIR
MAPLE FRAME, ROUND-CREST TYPE
Courtesy, Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum.

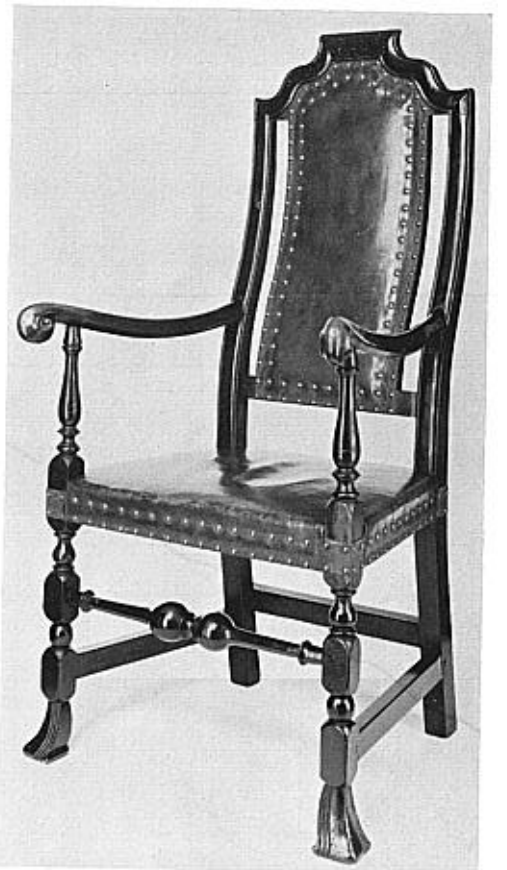

FIG. 2. "BOSTON" ARMCHAIR
MAPLE FRAME, UNDULATING-CREST TYPE
Courtesy, Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum.

Office for two other years, 1769 and 1771. In these years the number of chairs is out of all proportion to the other types of furniture listed. A category of "Bureaus, desks, drawers, etc." was listed and one for "tables." The number of items in each of these categories, while not infinitesimal, is never large; the largest single entry being 102 tables shipped from Newport in 1769. Chairs were then the most important furniture cargo shipped from all New England ports, and Boston was by no means the only manufacturing center.

In the 1769 Customs record,[6] Boston was the largest exporter of chairs, listing 828. Falmouth with only 12 and Salem with 448 chairs completed the total for the Massachusetts Bay area of 1,288 examples exported down the coast and to the West Indies. Rhode Island was also a large exporter and from that area 588 chairs were shipped. The figures continue down the coast with 768 chairs listed for Philadelphia. This immediately brings up the question of what type of chairs are intended by the unspecified customs report, and can one be certain that the Massachusetts Bay chairs were of the Boston type?

There is little doubt that the chairs exported at that date from Philadelphia and New York were largely Windsors. They appear in numerous advertisements of the makers in both cities, with specific references to export, such as the ad of Thomas Ash in Rivington's *New York Gazeteer*, February 17, 1774: "Thomas Ash, Windsor Chair Maker, at the Corner below St. Paul's Church in the Broad-Way, Makes and sells all kinds of Windsor chairs, high and low backs, garden and settees ditto. As several hundred pounds have been sent out of this province for this article, he hopes the public will encourage the business, as they can be had as cheap and good, if not superior to any imported; he has now by him, and intends keeping always a large quantity, so that merchants, masters of vessels, and others may be supplied upon the shortest notice."[7]

New York was vying with the trade in Philadelphia Windsors, and various makers like John Kelso of New York advertised that "he served a regular apprenticeship in one of the first shops in that way in Philadelphia."[8] While the Windsor was the popular cheap commodity from the Middle Atlantic cities, it was not manufactured in quantity in New England until after the Revolution.

In the records of 1771, which disclose only the exports to the West Indies, there are two interesting differences from the more complete records of 1769.[6] Salem and Boston together only exported 61 chairs to the Indies, indicating that much of their trade in these items must have been with the coastal cities. This is borne out by the other entries for 1769 listing the imports to the same areas, for instance, 125 chairs to Rhode Island, 168 to New York, 784 to Maryland, 879 to Virginia, 619 to North Carolina, 315 to South Carolina. These figures must be tempered by the realization that they included imports of actual English or European furniture, Windsor chairs from New York and Philadelphia, and "Boston chairs." The second notable difference in the 1771 Customs Report is that the area around Portsmouth, New Hampshire, then called "Piscataqua," exported 562 chairs to the Indies. It is odd that Piscataqua is not listed at all in 1769 since its production was obviously quite large, and whether or not Ports-

mouth was making "Boston chairs" is a moot question.

Aside from the specific description of the "Boston chairs" in Plunket Fleeson's advertisements of 1742 and 1744, there is further proof of the fact that this solid maple framed, leather-covered chair found much favor in various provinces up to the time of the Revolution. The chairs appear in a number of Philadelphia inventories between the years 1754 and 1773. The houses where they are listed were both grand and small establishments, and while some are listed in back rooms, many appear in use in the parlors.[9]

1754—1 doz Boston Chairs, at Farm —Charles Willing
6 Boston Chairs, in ye front parlour Southward—Ed Warner
1755—1 Dozn Boston Chairs—Capt Thomas Phillips
8 New England Chairs—James Murgatoyd
1763—7 New England chairs, Back Parlour—Wm Callender
1764—½ doz Leather bottom N.E. chairs, in the Front Room —Mary Standley
1765—6 Old New England chairs & an arm chair—Wm Jackson
1769—6 Boston Leather bottom maple chears—Richard Swan
1768-70—8 Boston made Leathr Bottom Maple chairs
6 old Boston made chairs —James Coultas, Whitby Hall
1770—6 boston Chairs—Joseph Hall, joiner
1773—6 boston Leather Chairs, in the little Parlour—Th. Turner

A further proof of their popularity in Philadelphia is the large number of these chairs which have been found in the past several decades in Philadelphia houses. One example is shown by Hornor,[10] and a considerable quantity of both arm and side chairs have been purchased from various Philadelphia families over the past forty years.[11] The original models may, of course, have been copied there, though most of the known examples seem very consistent in structure and the use of wood, and do not suggest Philadelphian products. The use of maple, for the frames and various underbracing woods, including oak in an example in the Museum of Fine Arts, are New England techniques. There is one set of chairs in the Albany Institute of History and Art branded PVR for their owner Peter van Renssalaer,[12] which have been thought to be local copies of a New England model, but there seems no reason to suppose that the chairs may not have been transported to Albany up the Hudson. This would have been no particular problem for a family who shipped much material to their home by that route.

The "Boston chairs" themselves deserve some attention (Figs. 1-3). They are a very sound and clever furniture solution. Their derivation in idea from late Stuart English chairs is particularly noticeable in the shaping of the crest and in the exposed stiles with a rectangular central panel in the back. In most English examples this panel is caned, but the colonist not only covered it with a more durable material but made the chair far more comfortable by shaping the back. The backs are handsomely formed in most examples with a fine forward curve to the stiles, and they are among the most comfortable type of seating furniture of the period, when compared to either a

splat-backed Queen Anne chair, a slat back, a bannister back, or an early Chippendale example.

The understructure of the chairs is extremely sound, with heavy rectilinear stretchers on the sides and back. The front stretcher has large ball-and-ring turnings in the center and two thimble turnings at the ends. The front legs are turned from square billets in vase-and-block form, and the Spanish feet are carved from the same member, but usually flare beyond the line of the leg, the additional width being glued on in most cases and carved. Many of the chairs have consequently lost the glued additions to the front feet. The alternate solution for the feet was the simple button, seen on (Fig. 1).

Armchairs of the type have the same varieties of turnings, crests and feet as the side chairs. On the examples shown in (Figs. 1 and 2) the front turnings show ball-and-ring on one chair and double-bulb turnings on the second, with similar variety in the thimble ends and other parts. The arms, in most examples are finely shaped and have scroll terminals. They are supported with long balusters in many examples (Fig. 2) and with vase-and-ball turnings in others (Fig. 1).

There are several Boston-type chairs with more unusual crests. An example in the William Ellery House, Newport, has the double horn-and-yoke crest found on many transitional Queen Anne chairs in Rhode Island and Connecticut. An interesting example in the Henry Ford Museum has a flat crest with a small rectangle rising from the center, finished with a small scroll on each side, very similar to a cane chair shown by Lockwood.[13] Whether these features are local phenomena or merely an individual maker's variation on a widely made type is impossible to say. One startling concession to style is the cabriole leg used on one otherwise typical turned-frame leather chair.[14] The leg is of straightish form and rectilinear in section, like that found on elaborate caned or upholstered furniture of the 1710-1740 period.[15]

There is one typological variation that seems to form a local subgroup, however, and that is a large number of button foot chairs with no crest and with baluster turned stiles (Fig. 4). The chairs are found with some frequency in New Hampshire and may represent the Piscataqua version of the Boston chair. One feature that they share with many northern Massachusetts and New Hampshire country chairs is a double stretcher at the sides. While this feature is desirable in many lighter chairs, it seems quite irrelevant in so sturdy a model as that shown in (Fig. 4), and suggests that it was either an accepted feature of local style or a reflection of double-stretcher English chairs.

There is one set of Boston chairs which can be attributed with some certainty to Salem. These have descended in the Pickering family and remain today in the Pickering House on Broad Street, Salem, with the tradition that they were made by the Reverend Theophilus Pickering. This worthy was a noted mechanic who made among other things a bellows dated 1724, an amusing desk, and a small looking glass, all still in the Pickering House. There seems little reason to doubt the tradition concerning the chairs. The Pickering examples include ten side chairs with the rounded crests and button feet, and an armchair with slightly variant turnings.[16] Theophilus was working in 1724 and died in 1747 when such chairs were gaining popularity and worrying the Trade Commissioners.

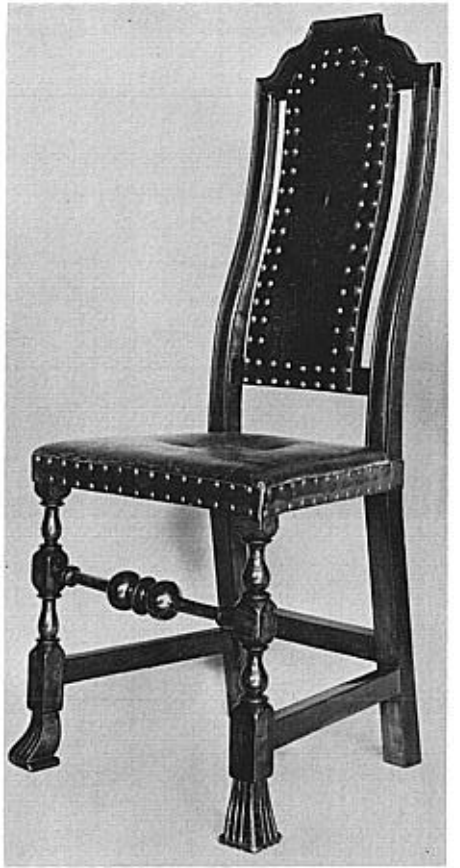

FIG. 3. "BOSTON" SIDECHAIR
MAPLE FRAME, ORIGINAL UPHOLSTERY
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1909.

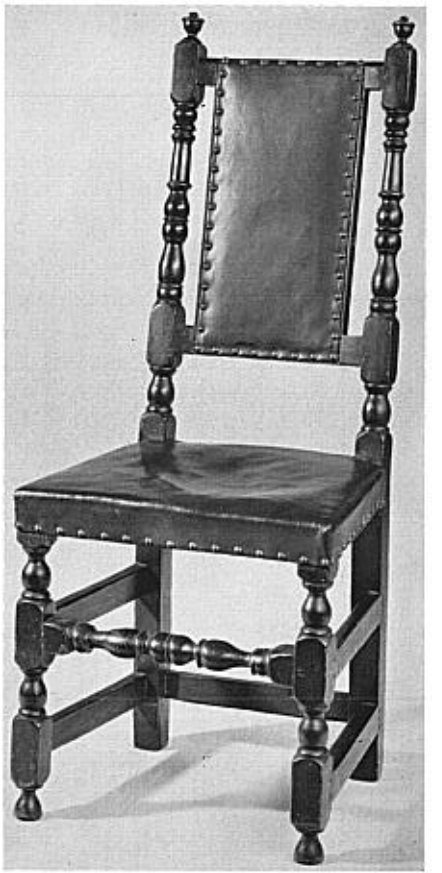

FIG. 4. "PISCATAQUA" (?) SIDECHAIR
MAPLE WITH GRAINED DECORATION
Courtesy, Israel Sack, Inc.

Another chair with a traditional family ascription is credited to another divine, Edward Holyoke (1689-1769), who became president of Harvard College. He too was reputed as a skilled workman, and his pride in turned woodwork is perhaps suggested in his portrait by Copley which shows him seated in the great English "thrown" chair used by the Presidents of Harvard.[17] His chair, shown in the Harvard Tercentenary Exhibition,[18] varies from all others in having five stretchers, a feature found on a number of chairs with caned backs having Cambridge or Boston histories.[19] It has the rounded crest and Spanish feet, and an unusually well-shaped rear stretcher.

The method of upholstering the chairs is very interesting. The back was tacked to the frame over a piece of coarse linen which has survived very well in examples with their original backs, like those in the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 3). The back leather is relatively heavy, attached usually with two parallel rows of brass-headed tacks. The seat may be tacked with two rows of tacks across the front and either one or two rows on the sides and back. The unusual feature is an added strip of leather which surrounds and reinforces the entire seat. This may have been to protect the edges of the actual seat leather from the possible cutting of tack heads, or merely to prevent wear at this vulnerable point. Its sanity and strength seems attested by the preservation of a number of original seats.

A related group of day beds showing nearly identical features have seldom been associated with the chairs. They have all been accepted as New England products, and show exact parallels in the turning of members, the types of feet, the crest shape, and the leather upholstery. There is an example with the round crest in the Metropolitan Museum,[20] and examples with undulating crests in the Brooklyn Museum[21] and formerly in the Wheeler and French Collections.[22] All of these examples have button feet and ball-and-ring turned stretchers, though the details vary as they do in the chairs.

The large numbers of Boston chairs that the export records, the ads of Plunket Fleeson, and the inventories of houses suggest seem borne out by the number of surviving examples. While many minor variations occur, there is a great consistency in the design in its two basic forms, or three if one includes the "Piscataqua" group.[23] Both the numbers and the fact that the only attributable examples were made by nonprofessional makers, suggest that the design of these chairs was a common pattern made widely in New England as a cash export product of proven salability. It was surely developed before 1742—the date of the Philadelphia ads—as the production must have been considerable when Fleeson complained about it. The first inventory reference is still later, however, in 1754. James Coultas noted that his chairs at Whitby Hall were old in 1768-1770, though Thomas Turner still found them stylish enough for his parlor in 1773. Like Pennsylvania slat-back chairs and other popular models of reasonable price, the Boston chairs probably continued in production for many years, certainly up to the time of the Revolution and perhaps later. A date between 1725 or 1730 and 1775 seems indicated for the majority. A few like the five stretcher example of Edward Holyoke's or that

with the double-horn and yoke crest can be dated more closely by their relationships to other styles.

Like many export products the name attached to the chairs is an outgrowth of the port of lading or the origin of the ships in which they traveled rather than the place they were made. Bilboa mirrors and Leghorn hats are both examples of this practice. So while we know that the chairs were produced from New Hampshire to Rhode Island, and large numbers in Salem, the eighteenth-century name would seem a fit reason for calling them "Boston chairs."

NOTES

[1] Robert W. Symonds, "The English Export Trade in Furniture to Colonial America," *Antiques* (June 1935), p. 216.

[2] Mabel Munson Swan, *Samuel McIntire, Carver, and the Sandersons, Early Salem Cabinetmakers* (Salem, 1934).

[3] Mabel Munson Swan, "Coastwise Cargoes of Venture Furniture," *Antiques* (April 1949), p. 279.

[4] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Sept. 23, 1742; also William McPherson Hornor, *The Blue Book of Philadelphia Furniture* (Philadelphia, 1935), p. 191.

[5] *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 14, 1744; also Hornor, *ibid.*

[6] The original records are in the Massachusetts Historical Society, and are published by Swan in *Antiques* (April 1949), pp. 278-279.

[7] *Rivington's New York Gazeteer*, Feb. 17, 1774; also Rita Gottesman, *The Arts and Crafts of New York* (New York, 1938), I, 110.

[8] *The New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury*, March 27, 1775; also Gottesman, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

[9] Hornor, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

[10] *Ibid.*, plate 16.

[11] Both Joseph Kindig, Jr., and David Stockwell have attested the large number of such chairs found in the Philadelphia area.

[12] Norman S. Rice, *New York Furniture before 1840* (Albany Institute, 1962), p. 20; and Benjamin Ginsburg, "The Furniture of Albany's Cherry Hill," *Antiques* (June 1960), Figs. 2-3.

[13] Luke Vincent Lockwood, *Colonial Furniture in America* (New York, 1913), Vol. II, fig. 487; Wallace Nutting, *Furniture Treasury* (New York, 1928), no. 2134.

[14] *Antiques* (July 1957), p. 1.

[15] For instance: Joseph Downs, *American Furniture, Queen Anne and Chippendale Periods* (New York, 1952), nos. 11, 12, 71, 72, and 96, or Lockwood, *op. cit.*, nos. 478 and 654.

[16] Esther Singleton, *Furniture of Our Forefathers*, Part V (New York, 1901), p. 318 ill.

[17] Barbara N. Parker and Anne B. Wheeler, *John Singleton Copley* (Boston, 1938), plate 20.

[18] Harvard Tercentenary Exhibition, *Catalogue of Furniture, Silver, Pewter, Glass, Ceramics, Paintings, and Prints* (Harvard, 1936), no. 210, fig. 34.

[19] Lockwood, *op. cit.*, II, no. 482; Nutting, *op. cit.*, nos. 2044-2047.

[20] Nutting, *op. cit.*, no. 1591.

[21] Charles Nagel, *American Furniture 1650-1850* (New York, 1949), opp. p. 14.

[22] Lockwood, *op. cit.*, II, no. 641, and Nutting, *op. cit.*, no. 1603.

[23] While examples exist in nearly every major collection, there are many interesting variations to be seen in published works, many of which are herewith listed for convenience: Undulating crest type: American Wing Guide 1961, fig. 25; *Antiques* (Aug. 1960), p. 133, and (Nov. 1962), p. 517; Lockwood, *op. cit.*, II, 481 and 3rd edition Supplement 1926 fig. LXXIX; Irving Lyon, *Colonial Furniture of New England* (Cambridge, 1891), fig. 70; Nutting, *op. cit.*, no. 2681. Round crest type: *Antiques* (Aug. 1960), p. 133; Helen Comstock, *American Furniture* (New York, 1962), no. 28; Lockwood, *op. cit.*, II, nos. 484 and 485; Nutting, *op. cit.*, nos. 2681 and 2090; *George Dudley Seymour's Furniture Collection* (Conn. Hist. Soc., 1958), p. 81. Turned stile or "Piscataqua" type: Comstock, *op. cit.*, no. 137; Lockwood, *op. cit.*, II, no. 460; and Nutting, *op. cit.*, 1963 and 1972.