Jane Williamson

Stephen Foster Stevens, Quaker Cabinetmaker

Plainness among Quakers was a spiritual and material alternative to the pursuit of fashion—"the most imperious of despotisms," as one Friend put it. How plainness applied to furniture design varied. But the Vermont cabinetwork of Stephen Foster Stevens shows that Quaker furniture responded to concerns other than the marketplace.

In the traditional scholarship of American decorative arts, the phrase "Vermont furniture" has been a virtual oxymoron. Based largely upon the aesthetic standards of cultural and economic elites, this art history has had little to say about Vermont, seen as a primarily rural state with no major urban centers of wealth and culture on the order of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, or Newport that could generate and fill a demand for high-style furniture. William Hosley first explored the existence of sophisticated cabinetmaking operations in early Vermont in an *Old-Time New England* article in 1987, work that was confirmed and expanded by Kenneth Zogry in the 1995 exhibit and book on Vermont furniture, *"The Best the Country Affords."*[1] Focusing on the period 1790–1830, a time of tremendous growth in Vermont, Hosley suggested that the tradition of the "jack-of-all-trades" who made money from farming and other pursuits as well as from making furniture "was a stronger one in Vermont than the industrial model."[2]

Stephen Foster Stevens (1799–1857) of Montpelier and Monkton was such a cabinetmaker (fig. 1). Six pieces of Stevens's work as well as day books, diaries, photographs, letters, and other artifacts have survived and remain together at Rokeby Museum in Ferrisburgh, Vermont.[3] The collection is an unusual, and unusually complete, record

Fig 1. *Stephen Foster and Rachel Byrd Stevens in the 1840s; courtesy Rokeby Museum.*

of a rural artisan and provides a picture of a cabinetmaker living and working in a tight-knit, nineteenth-century Quaker community. This description of his life and work aims to expand our knowledge of cabinetmaking in Vermont, to examine the ways Stevens's Quakerism influenced his work,[4] and to explore the meaning of plainness for Friends in the early nineteenth century.

Stephen Foster Stevens was born March 24, 1799, in Montpelier, which his parents, Clark and Huldah Foster Stevens, had only recently helped to settle. Between the end of the American Revolution, in which he served, and his move from Rochester, Massachusetts, to Vermont in 1790, Clark Stevens had become a Quaker. He established and was the driving force behind the Montpelier Meeting, which was the "spiritual center" for the majority of the Montpelier community from its founding until about 1830.[5]

Clark Stevens became a Friend "by convincement" at the height of a period of sectarian reform among American Quakers that began in Philadelphia around 1750 and spread in succeeding decades to New York and New England. The reformers worked to correct what they regarded as—and the record indicates was—a loosening of religious observation, a time when wealthy and powerful Quakers were nearly indistinguishable from their "worldly" counterparts. Chief among the reforms was a more rigorously defined and enforced devotion to simplicity in speech, behavior, apparel, and household furnishings. This was when the Quakers self-consciously styled themselves as the "peculiar people" of the stereotype, adopting a uniform and speech patterns by which they could be readily identified.[6] Most meetings lost members during this period as disownments mounted. The reinvigorated discipline

worked to separate the truly committed from the "nominal professors," and those who joined the Friends during this period—including Clark Stevens—had to be ready to conform.

This, then, was the familial and community context into which Stephen Foster Stevens was born—and in which he lived his entire life. His move from Montpelier to Monkton in 1822 put him in the heart of Vermont's "Quaker country." With a few exceptions, Vermont's Quaker meetings were then clustered in Addison County, and among them was Ferrisburgh, Vermont's most important and only quarterly meeting.[7] Like Montpelier, many of these communities—including Monkton and Ferrisburgh—counted a significant number of Quakers among their early settlers. It was Friend Benjamin Ferris who, along with several other Quakers, applied for a charter for the town of Ferrisburgh. Rokeby Museum is also part of Ferrisburgh's early Quaker history. Thomas R. Robinson, from a prosperous and prominent Newport, Rhode Island, family, was one of many early Quaker residents. He established his family at Rokeby in 1793, and they soon took on a central role in both town and meeting that they were to play for decades.

Although exact numbers are not available, Quakers predominated in both Ferrisburgh and Monkton, as they had in Montpelier. The Ferrisburgh Meeting was "allowed" in 1791, granted preparative status in 1792, and, in 1796, constructed a permanent meetinghouse. By comparison, the Congregational and Baptist churches were not established until 1824 and 1821, respectively. Neither denomination had enough members to build its own church, and in 1840 Ferrisburgh's non-Quaker denominations joined together to build the "Union Church." While the Friends were numerous in Monkton, they were not the first or only denomination in the early days. The Baptist Church was organized in 1794, the Monkton Meeting in 1795, and the Methodist Church in 1797. The Quakers and Methodists both built houses of worship in 1811.[8]

Stevens was raised to be and remained a strictly observant Quaker throughout his life. Indeed, the record shows that he was one of a select group of leaders—or "weighty Friends"—who shouldered most of the work of the meeting.[9] He was delegated to represent the Monkton Preparative Meeting at the Ferrisburgh Monthly Meeting at least once every year from 1823 to 1836. He served Monkton as library trustee and overseer of the poor, and, from 1825 to 1834, as clerk—the highest office. He was similarly active in the Ferrisburgh Monthly Meeting, variously assigned to visit outlying meetings, clear Friends for marriage and converts for membership, and counsel Friends "under dealings," those being investigated for infractions of the discipline. He was appointed register, treasurer, and, in 1828, clerk of the Meeting.[10] He was also recorded a minister in 1830 and 1835.[11]

Quaker religious beliefs were centered on the direct and individual experience of divine grace, or, as it was called,

the "Inward Light." Although there were no religious doctrines beyond the central one of the Light, there were standards for behavior, or "testimonies," that guided virtually every aspect of Quaker life from the mundane to the spiritual. These standards were laid out in books of discipline and monitored through an informal system of social control.[12] The New York Yearly Meeting, to which all Vermont meetings belonged,[13] published its own book of discipline in 1810.[14] The discipline prohibited or discouraged those trades or means of getting a living that impinged on other Quaker testimonies. The peace testimony, for example, prohibited Friends from engaging in the manufacture or sale of guns or gunpowder, not just from taking up arms.[15] Tavern owners could not serve alcohol,[16] and Rowland T. Robinson, a contemporary of Stevens, head of the Rokeby household, and clerk of the Ferrisburgh Meeting, went so far as to refuse to grind grain for farmers who planned to sell it to distillers.[17] The discipline also advised Friends to place their children as apprentices with other Friends and, conversely, to prefer members' children when taking apprentices. The book states that if "after due inquiry" no suitable place can be found, the Monthly Meeting should be consulted and "is at liberty to act therein as it may judge right."[18] As a specific alternative to a Quaker apprenticeship, the meeting might choose to pay tuition for proper schooling. Consistent with this point of discipline, in 1817 Clark Stevens apprenticed his son Stephen to cabinetmaker Timothy Davis, a Friend and fellow emigré from Rochester.

Stevens kept a record of this apprenticeship in a small booklet made from papers folded and secured with a straight pin.[19] It begins, "I go to Timothy Davis; and a view Learning the cabinet Making."[20] Because the rural economy could not support full-time craftwork, most country artisans engaged in farming as well to supplement their incomes; it is no surprise, then, that Stevens's record of his apprenticeship included such entries as "Work 9 1/2 days making Sugar" and "work on the farm, work in the shop 3 days this month." His tallying of days in and out of the shop varied with the agricultural calendar; during June and July he spent as few as two or three days in the shop, while in the winter months he was often "wholly in the shop," as he noted in February 1819. The majority of his time, however, seems to have been spent on the farm. He recorded only sixty-six days in the shop for 1818, and in 1819 he was in the shop through April, but only "at Sundry times" (a total of sixty-two days) after that. Clearly, his apprenticeship with a rural cabinetmaker prepared him for a life spent as much in the farm field as in the shop.

On his days in the shop, Stevens learned to make a range of plain, functional furniture. By 1820, when his training was complete, he had produced twelve tables, eight lightstands, seven bureaus, four chests, and ten coffins. A list at the back of his diary documents fewer than fifty pieces of furniture during the three years of his apprenticeship.

Having achieved the status of jour-

neyman cabinetmaker, Stevens moved from his Montpelier home to work in the Monkton shop of Friend John Knowles. Departing on May 8, 1822, Stevens pronounced himself "in good company with tolerable easy seat and lively horses in good speed for Monkton . . . my new home," in a second homemade paper diary[21] that began the record of this period of his life. He mentioned his work in the shop—including a record of his first orders, for a bureau and bedsteads on May 13, 1822—only occasionally in this short account (1821–22) devoted largely to everyday life, attendance at meeting, and family events. Yet in this second diary, Stevens made clear his preference for making furniture over farming. Shortly after his record began, Stevens was called to the farm of Valentine Meader, a Quaker neighbor who was traveling in Ohio. Someone was needed to tend the farm and stay with Meader's wife and child. "The thots of leaving my shop give me disagreeable emotions," Stevens wrote, "but thinking of their [the Meaders'] great necessity and no other way appearing to their alleviation I apprehended it best for me, tho rather tedious to perform." Out of the shop again with sore feet in July, Stevens noted on his return, "Now again to work in the shop the thots of this . . . accompanyed with joy so I could hardly avoid shedding tears."

If Stevens kept other diaries, they have not survived. Two substantial account books, however, record furniture orders from 1822 to 1837 and help create a detailed picture of Stevens's entire production. The first book was started in 1821 by John Knowles, who used only one page—which, incidentally, included a charge to Stevens for boards. The second page is headed "Memorandum of cabinet work I make at John Knowleses commensing 5th mo 16 1822" and runs through 1829.[22] Until 1825 Stevens kept this as a true ledger, recording the work and its cost on the left-hand page and how the account was settled—"by note" or, for example, "Settled by 12 Bushels Rye"—on the right. Details of the business arrangement between Stevens and Knowles are not known, but on January 1, 1825, both men signed an entry stating, "The foregoing accounts are this day devided between the undersigners and also all book accounts settled between them." It appears that Stevens began to work independently at that point. He also, thereafter, used this book as a day book, or chronological record of orders taken only.[23]

Six pieces in the collection at Rokeby Museum bear inscriptions by or have been attributed to Stevens—a signed 1825 blanket chest with two drawers (fig. 2), a signed 1826 cherry bureau (fig. 3), a hooded cradle (fig. 4), an 1836 maple table (fig. 5), and two dome-topped trunks, one with Stevens's initials and the other with those of Ann King, a member of the Rokeby household, in brass tacks (figs. 6 and 7). In addition, Stevens signed his initials in wet paint (of the same color as that on the 1825 blanket chest) on the inside door of a built-in cupboard in one of the museum buildings, raising the question whether he was responsible for its woodwork rather than for its painting only. [24]

Fig. 2. *A variant of traditional nailed, six-board construction, this basswood chest has dovetailed drawers and its original gray/blue paint and brass drawer pulls. It is marked "Manufactured by S. F. Stevens 6th mo 1825" on the inside bottom of the bottom drawer and "Monkton, 6th mo 1825" on the back, both in red carpenter's crayon; Quakers used numbers to designate days and months because the common terms for months were derived from the names of pagan gods. Stevens obviously did not find it necessary to eliminate all decorative detail, for he has added delicately shaped bracket feet and a simple cornice on the lift top, bringing a hint of elegance to the otherwise severe facade of a piece whose major value is its utility. A penciled note in the upper right hand corner of the top—"Seven pairs of flannel sheets in here 8th mo, 1st, 1846"—indicates its continuing usefulness in the Robinson household. Courtesy Rokeby Museum.*

These documented pieces of furniture are entirely typical of Stevens's total output as recorded in his day books (table 1). In the fourteen years from 1822 to 1835, the ten types of furniture he made most frequently were common bedsteads (71), cherry tables (64), lightstands (60), chests (60), bureaus (59), trunks (55), tables (35), highpost bedsteads (24), French bedsteads (22), and two-drawer chests (18). With the exception of the cradle, the Rokeby pieces are all on this list. The six pieces share a number of characteristics and presumably resemble the rest of Stevens's production. The quality of the craftsmanship is superb, as fine as that in any shop in Middlebury or Windsor. Drawer construction, for example, employed finely cut

TABLE 1. FURNITURE MADE, BY TYPE AND CUSTOMER (QUAKER/NON-QUAKER)

Furniture Type	*Total Made*	*Sold to Quakers N(%)*	*Sold to non-Quakers N(%)*
Bedsteads, common	71	28 (39)	43 (61)
Bedsteads, cricket	1	0	1 (100)
Bedsteads, French	22	7 32)	15 (68)
Bedsteads, highpost	24	16 (67)	8 (33)
Bedsteads, press	4	0	4 (100)
Bedsteads, roll joint	1	1 (100)	0
Bedsteads, swing	4	2 (50)	2 (50)
Bedsteads, truckle	5	4 (80)	1 (20)
Bedsteads, turn-up	4	1 (25)	3 (75)
Bookcases	12	7 (58)	5 (42)
Bookcases, sideboard	1	0	1 (100)
Bureaus	59	27 (46)	32 (54)
Chairs, sets	5	0	5 (100)
Chests	60	33 (55)	27 (45)
Chests, 2-drawer	18	10 (56)	8 (44)
Cradles	5	2 (40)	3 (60)
Cupboards	1	1 (100)	0
Desks	6	4 (67)	2 (33)
Lightstands	60	26 (43)	34 (57)
Pine stands	3	3 (100)	0
Secretaries	2	0	2 (100)
Tables	35	17 (49)	18 (51)
Tables, birch	6	1 (17)	5 (83)
Tables, button	1	1 (100)	0
Tables, cherry	64	27 (42)	37 (58)
Tables, curly maple	10	6 (60)	4 (40)
Tables, kitchen	16	9 (56)	7 (44)
Tables, match	2	0	2 (100)
Tables, pine	1	0	1 (100)
Tables, pine leaf	6	3 (50)	3 (50)
Tables, roll joint	3	2 (67)	1 (33)
Trunks	55	34 (62)	21 (38)
Washstands	8	3(37.5)	5(62.5)
Writing stands	1	1 (100)	0
Totals	576	276 (48)	300 (52)

Fig. 3. *This bureau is made primarily of cherry. A box frame on scrolled bracket base, it has dovetailed drawers, a coved cornice, and its original bails. It is marked on the back, "Manufactured by S. F. Stevens/Monkton 1st [7th ?] mo 1826" in pencil. An extremely common form in Vermont before 1800, the bureau was beyond the peak of its popularity when Stevens made it in the 1820s. Courtesy Rokeby Museum.*

dovetails. In fact, Stevens's skill as a craftsman did not go unnoticed. In 1825 he received, and apparently turned down, an urgent offer of employment from a businessman in Washington, New York, whose "Machine making" operation was powered entirely by water.[25]

During his fourteen years in Monkton, Stevens ventured beyond the utilitarian only slightly. For example, he neither used expensive woods such as mahogany nor imitated them with paint, as many a country cabinetmaker did. With the exception of cherry, from which he made a great many tables and an occasional lightstand or bureau, Stevens seldom identified the woods he used in his furniture.

Stevens's work consisted almost exclusively of practical pieces needed for everyday life—bedsteads, tables, blanket chests, lightstands, and bureaus. Comparing his output to that of other small Vermont cabinetmakers whose businesses also relied on such practical furnishings shows some interesting differences. Stevens made very few chairs—only five sets in fourteen years—compared, for example, to Elizur Peck of Landgrove, Vermont, who made more than eighty, and Stillman Buss of Cornwall, who made more than sixty.[26] Nearly half of Stevens's production was in the form of tables (25 percent) and bedsteads (24 percent). This suggests that small cabinetmakers sought what economies of scale

they could by specializing when setting up their lathes. Stevens may well have concentrated on bedsteads and tables because chairs were readily available when he set up shop in 1822.

Stevens identified his bedsteads and tables by type, and while many are familiar (for example, common, highpost, and trundle bedsteads), others are not. Searches of numerous furniture dictionaries failed to produce definitions of "cricket," "swing," and "turn-up" bedsteads and "button" and "match" tables, although one could certainly attempt some logical speculations. Elizur Peck listed one turn-up and Stillman Buss one swing bedstead, suggesting that these terms were local vernacular and not unique to Stevens.[27]

Chief among the influences on Stevens and his work was the aesthetic influence of the testimony of simplicity, which pervaded and seemed to define the very essence of Quakerism during this period. "Having found God in the simplicity of the Inward Light," said one author,

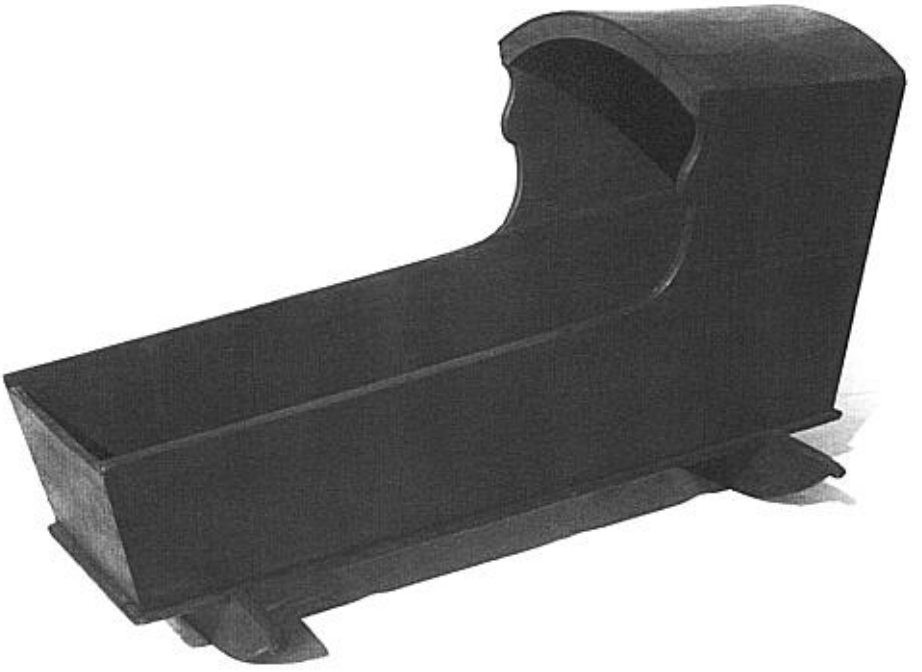

Fig. 4. *This hooded maple cradle is not signed, but Stevens's day book indicates that he sold a cradle to Rowland Thomas Robinson in January 1823 for five dollars. Rowland and Rachel Robinson's first son, Thomas, was born in November 1822, and the cradle was probably made for him. In his analysis of Vermont furniture made between 1769 and 1860, Kenneth Zogry found only a handful of extant cradles, most from the northwestern part of the state, and no other hooded examples. Courtesy Rokeby Museum.*

Fig 5. *This maple table is marked in pencil on the underside of the top "2nd mo 1836" in pencil in a hand much like the other marked pieces and has been attributed to Stevens. Interestingly, the legs, square at the juncture with the top and apron and then turned and tapered, are like those frequently used on Shaker tables. Courtesy Rokeby Museum.*

[the Quaker] worshiped Him in the simplicity of silent waiting and adoration: no anthems, no hymns, no organ music; no elaborately carved pulpit or stained glass windows or religious images. The typical Quaker meetinghouse was a plain structure furnished with rows of plain benches on which a plainly dressed people waited in silence until someone should be moved to speak in plain words . . . The simplicity of their worship carried over into the daily existence of the Friends to govern their dress, their speech, the furniture of their houses, their whole way of life.[28]

What had begun as a felt need to remove earthly distractions from spiritual experience and religious truth was eventually set down in writing and made a "badge" of sectarianism that was required for membership.[29] The book of discipline advised Friends "to manifest [plainness] in their dress, speech, furniture of their houses, manner of living and general deportment."[30] The strictures on "Plainness in Dress, Address, etc.," continue:

Should any so far depart from that simplicity which truth leads into, as to imitate and adopt the vain and extravagant fashions of the world, in speech, behavior, apparel, the furniture of their houses, or in other respects, it is earnestly desired that Friends, from time to time, when such things appear, take due and prudent care therein; and should any so far reject the tender admonitions of their Friends, and the concern of the society, as to continue in their deviations, for their cases to be brought to the Monthly Meeting.[31]

While those who were reported to be out of discipline for whatever reason were "to be treated in a Christian spirit, and in the persuasive language of love and tenderness,"[32] their transgressions were not ignored. Table 2 summarizes all lapses from discipline reported to the Ferrisburgh Monthly Meeting during the years Stevens was a member. Departures from plainness were among the most common—and most severely punished—infractions; 95 percent of Friends reported out of plainness were disowned. Only once was acknowledgment accepted, and that individual—Nicholas Wing—was disowned when he lapsed from plainness a second time seven years later.[33] All but seven of the nineteen departures from plainness were specifically noted as in either dress or address (speech). We can only speculate whether any of the remaining seven related to household furnishings.

Standards for plainness in speech and dress were both more explicit and more consistent from meeting to meeting and thus more easily and frequently enforced. They were also more public. It

TABLE 2. DEALINGS AND DISOWNMENTS, FERRISBURGH MONTHLY MEETING, 1822–1836

Nature of Infraction	*Dealings Total N*	*Acknowledgment* N(%)*	*Disownments N(%)*	*Other** N*
Neglect meeting attendance	20	0	18 (90)	2 (10)
Marry out	20	7 (35)	13 (65)	0
Depart from plainness	19†	1 (5)	18 (95)	0
Attend a place of diversion	9	0	8 (89)	1 (11)
Attend a horse race	7	4 (57)	3 (43)	0
Lying	4	0	2 (50)	2 (50)
Attend a wedding of other faith	3	1 (33)	2(67)	0
Drinking to excess	2	0	2(100)	0
Fraud	1	0	1(100)	0
Going into debt	1	1(100)	0	0
Adultery	1	0	1(100)	0
Fighting	1	1(100)	0	0
Using abusive/insulting language	1	0	1(100)	0
Total	89	15 (17)	69 (77)	5 (6)

* Friends wishing to make amends for lapses in discipline were said to "make acknowledgment."

** These are complaints that were dismissed, appeals made and postponed, and other dealings for which no resolution was ever noted in the minutes.

† Nine were departures from plainness in dress and address, two in dress, one in address, and seven not specified.

Figs. 6 and 7. *The larger basswood trunk (fig. 6) is covered in animal hide affixed with brass tacks, which were also used to spell out Stevens's initials on the top. Rawhide hinges have deteriorated badly, the hide cover is very worn and partly missing, and the paper that once lined the inside is now left only in the top. Initials on the smaller, leather-covered trunk (fig. 7) indicate that it was owned by Ann King, a member of the Robinson household. It is decorated with brass tacks, is lined with paper, and has cloth tape hinges. Stevens added the dome-topped trunk to his offerings in 1828, and it soon became one of his most popular forms. Courtesy Rokeby Museum.*

was necessary that Friends be readily recognizable when out in the "world," both as part of the need to witness and as a check on behavior. If the clothing left any doubt, the manner of speech would remove it. Thus to put on worldly dress and attend a horse race, as three young Vermont Friends did in 1824, was tantamount to resigning from membership. How the standards for plainness were enforced in the private sphere of the home, however, is much less clear. Although household furnishings were to be "plain," what that meant was open to interpretation and certainly varied from meeting to meeting.

Although Quakers used the term "plain" repeatedly and in many contexts, no precise rules or boundaries were spelled out, and its meaning is not always clear. Logically, we tend to think first of plain as the opposite of ornate, as lacking in decoration, and certainly that was a strong element of its meaning for Quakers. More than pure decorative embellishment, however, what worried the Quakers most was fashion—"the most imperious of despotisms"[34] that seemed to dominate the lives of those who heeded its pull. In her study of Quaker costume, Amelia Mott Gummere explained that what qualified an item for use by the Quakers was its unfashionableness: "When the mode changes, and a style is dropped, the Quaker will be found just ready to adopt it."[35] In the second half of the eighteenth century, for example, Quaker women wore blue or green aprons because white ones were "the height of fashion." Later, when white was out of fashion for aprons, Quaker women took it up.[36] What the observant Quaker looked for in furniture, then, would have been its lack of fashion, since, as English Quaker observer Thomas Clarkson wrote in 1806, "splendid furniture also would be considered as pernicious as splendid clothes."[37]

The Stevens furniture in the Rokeby collection seems to fit Gummere's "rule." However finely constructed, most of the traditional or vernacular forms Stevens favored were never really "in fashion" and, by worldly standards, were outdated when they were built. The Stevens bureau of 1826 (see fig. 4), for example, was a popular form when it was introduced in the second half of the eighteenth century. Noting two early Vermont examples, one from Bennington in 1775 and one from Middletown in 1800, Zogry has asserted that the chest of graduated drawers was the most prevalent form of case furniture in western Vermont before 1810.[38] It was probably this strong association of the form with a date of or just before 1800 that led a cataloger to date the Rokeby bureau at 1790—nine years before its maker was born and thirty-six years before it was made. A similar error was made in cataloging the hooded cradle with a date of 1780 (see fig. 5), when it was actually produced in 1823. It seems possible that Stevens's master Timothy Davis had not updated his repertoire of furniture styles since his own apprenticeship.[39] Certainly customers wishing to display their taste and knowledge of the latest style through their choice of furniture would have taken their business elsewhere.

We do not know if Stephen Foster Stevens learned of new styles as they evolved, but he certainly had the opportunity. While Monkton in 1825 was definitely rural, it was not isolated; it is no more than fifteen miles from Middlebury, which had become a regional style center by 1810.[40] The Middlebury shop of Hastings Warren was turning out mahogany-veneered secretaries in the most fashionable late neoclassical taste by 1825 (fig. 8), the same year Stevens made the two-drawer blanket chest. If Stevens had cared to, he could have learned much about the latest styles from a short trip to Middlebury. But as an observant Quaker, he was subject to influences beyond those of the market.

While Stevens did not take his stylistic cues from Hastings Warren or other fashionable cabinetmakers, quantities of items he produced did change over time. Although he introduced only a few new pieces, production of several traditional and dated forms declined over the years. Only 13 percent of all common and 21 percent of all highpost bedsteads Stevens produced between 1822 and 1835 were made after 1830, for example. By comparison, Stevens made his first French bedstead—probably a sleigh bed, and the most identifiably fashionable item in his record—in 1827 and 68 percent of all French bedsteads during the five years he remained in business after 1830. He sold slightly more French bedsteads after 1830 than common and highpost bedsteads combined. Production of two-drawer chests also declined, with only 11 percent made after 1830. These modest changes indicate the extent of Stevens's efforts and his clients' desires to keep up with the times.

Price analysis provides some additional information. The cost of some items remained remarkably consistent over time. Stevens charged $2.50 for a common bedstead in 1822 and in 1835, for example. Pine chests were consistently priced at $2.00 to $3.00, and those with one or two drawers at $4.00 to $6.00. Prices charged for some items were based on size. Bureaus, for example, ranged widely, from a low of $12.00 (the most common price) to $30.00, based, presumably, on height and number of drawers. The lengths of tables and trunks were usually noted, and prices increased with size. Yet price does not seem to have correlated with fashion. The French bedstead, for example, was moderately priced. Half the prices indicated were $7.00 or $7.50, and only one was higher ($8.00). By comparison, two highpost bedsteads—one of the most outdated forms—cost $10.00 each in 1826. This was twice the usual price, however, because the posts on these two were turned.

The most expensive items were the larger case pieces. Eleven bureaus cost $25.00 or more, and the desks, secretaries, and sideboard bookcase were $30.00. Thirteen of these sixteen larger, more expensive pieces were purchased by non-Quakers.[41] While it is impossible to know what combination of wealth, need, and religious belief these purchases reflect, non-Quakers acquired three-fourths of the expensive desks and secretaries, while Friends bought four-fifths of the inexpensive ($2.00 to $5.00) writ-

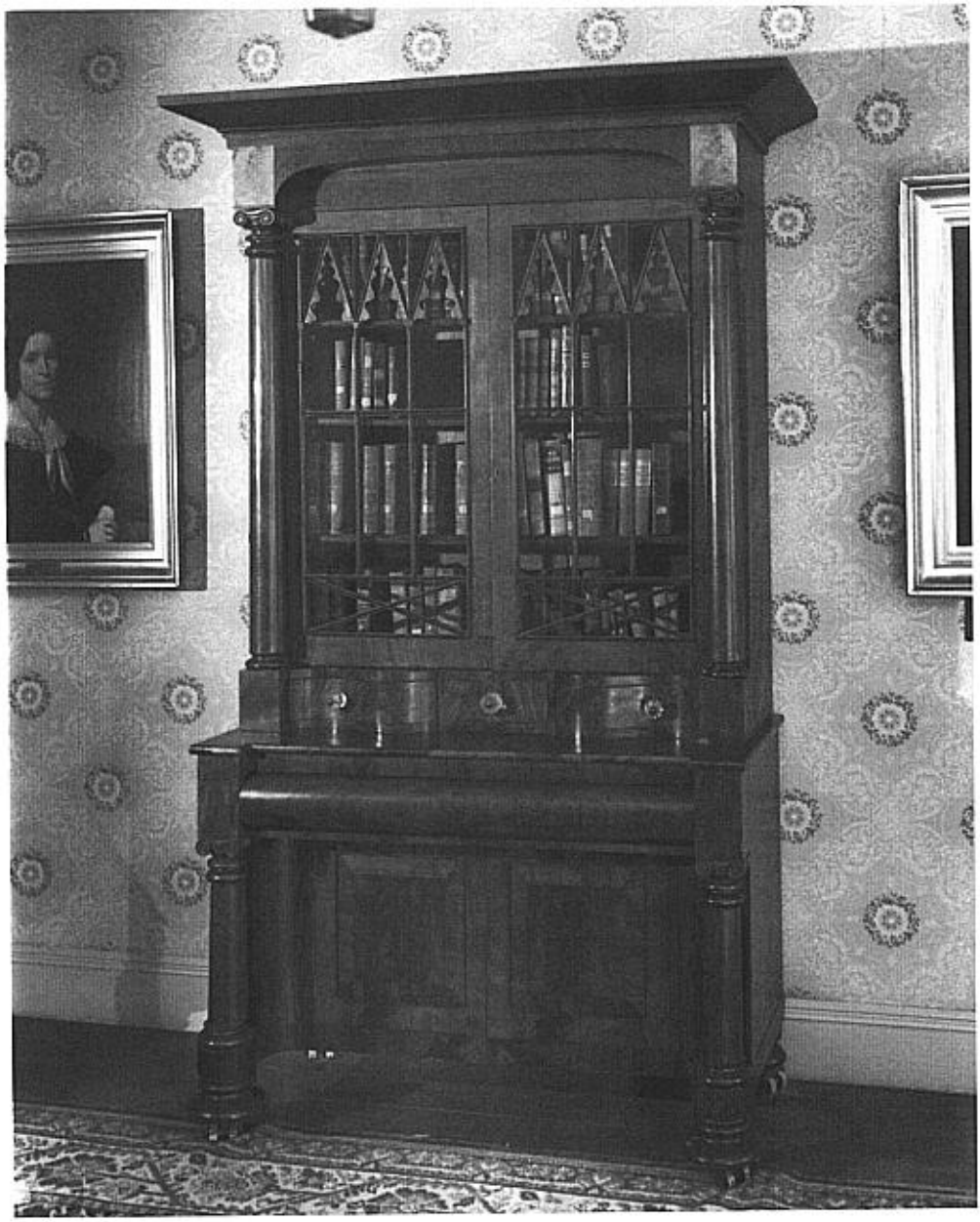

Fig. 8. *This secretary, marked "H. Warren" in pencil on a drawer bottom, combines tapered Ionic columns with Gothic fretwork on the doors, and its veneered surfaces are concave, convex, and serpentine. Zogry has termed it "as complex as it is monumental." Courtesy Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, Vermont.*

ing desks or stands.

Comparing the work of Stephen Foster Stevens with that of John Needles (1786–1878), a Friend and cabinetmaker in Baltimore, clearly shows variation in meeting discipline. Although Needles was thirteen years older than Stevens, he was at work during the same period and was an equally "ardent and active" Quaker.[42] There the similarities end, however, for John Needles was the proprietor of a large cabinetmaking operation with a factory in the rear and display rooms in the front. He produced numerous pieces in mahogany as well as at least one each in walnut (fig. 9) and rosewood, the latter a desk for himself.[43] A Needles sideboard of about 1825 with doors paneled in pointed arches shows a remarkably early influence of the Gothic Revival, and Needles made numerous pairs of mahogany card tables in the 1810s and 1820s (fig. 10), a time when card playing was both at its height of popularity in fashionable circles and contrary to discipline in the New York Yearly Meeting. Charles Montgomery has noted the "remarkable degree" to which Needles's "furniture reflects stylistically the changing and varied tastes of the first half of the nineteenth century." His early interest in the neoclassic styles of Hepplewhite and Sheraton was "supplant-

Fig. 9. *A walnut sofa table made by Baltimore Quaker John Needles, 1830–40; courtesy Baltimore Museum of Art.*

Fig. 10. *One of a pair of mahogany card tables made by John Needles, 1820–40. Courtesy Baltimore Museum of Art; Middendorf Foundation Fund BMA 1972.26A.*

ed in quick succession by the French, the Grecian, and the Gothic as set forth in the design books" of the day.[44]

Needles's involvement in this fashionable trade was a concern to his wife Eliza, if not to his meeting. In a memoir of her mother, Needles's daughter reported that Eliza "manifested the same care to have the necessary additions neat and free from extravagance, saying she did not want to make any display, refused to have mahogany chairs lest it should lead into other expenses" and that "she often said there were many things that were not as plain and simple about the house as her taste and feeling called for." These concerns notwithstanding, Needles was recorded a minister a few years before he retired from business in 1853, and he spent the rest of his life traveling with

other ministering Friends.[45]

The book of discipline also advised Friends to associate only with other Friends,[46] which tended to create strong business as well as personal ties and to promise the Quaker businessman a certain clientele.[47] In Stevens's case, nearly half (48 percent) of furniture sales listed in his day books between 1822 and 1835 were to Quakers.[48] Although sales to Quakers did not account for the majority of his business, they were a substantial portion of it, one Stevens was able, no doubt, to rely on from year to year.

Despite his furniture's lack of modishness, Stevens did not want for business. By 1830, the shop was busy enough that he needed help—though apparently not liquid enough to pay for it. In a letter to his brother James, he discussed the possibility of hiring one Anson Parson.

> I think I should like such help as he probably is, but to pay money for any help seems to be a thing that the business will not support. I have the offer of one of Christopher Almys sons as apprentice—he is about 17 years old and has worked at joinerwork some—but as Anson is reasonable in his price and I want immediate help will say if he will come and work one mo and then if we both of us like, perhaps we can agree for longer time—but let me at this early period tell him not to expect immediate money—I had better have no help than to be obligated to raise for his work what his work will not fetch . . . I wish him to bring all the tools he has got and come immediately after this information reaches him.[49]

The result of these negotiations is not in the existing record, but Stevens did secure some needed help in February 1831 when he took on his wife's brother, John Huntington Byrd, as an indentured apprentice. The apprenticeship was cut short by two years, however, because Byrd was not acquiring the skills needed to succeed as a cabinetmaker[50] and because Stevens decided to sell his shop[51] and return to the family homestead in Montpelier to farm. Whether his inability to find—or afford—satisfactory help entered into this decision is not known. Stevens did say of his father that "his not being prepared to sell his farm is like slaves not being prepared for freedom,"[52] suggesting that he returned home to aid his aging parents—and did so reluctantly.

Work on the family farm kept Stevens busy nearly full time. His account book from the period shows him taking only occasional woodworking jobs, mostly coffins.[53] His interest in "mechanics," however, continued to find an outlet in various inventions; he received a patent for a platform scale in 1848.[54] A respected member of his community throughout his life, Stevens served in Montpelier town offices and in the state legislature. He was a cofounder and active member of the Washington County Anti-Slavery Society and harbored escaped slaves on the Montpelier farm. He died in 1857.

The modern scholar faces a number of difficulties in understanding the role plainness played in the everyday lives of Friends in the late eighteenth and early decades of the nineteenth centuries.[55] Although Quakers were subject to the testimony of simplicity nationwide, the

Religious Society of Friends imposed very little in the way of central authority. The need to comply may have been absolute, but definitions of and requirements for plainness were never precisely articulated. Friends lived in and struggled with the world and its temptations everyday; they were left to work out standards for behavior through an intense group process at the level of the monthly meeting. And while Friends within each meeting seem to have shared an understanding of what those standards were, they did not record them.[56] Monthly meeting minutes provide little or no detail on lapses from plainness or other aspects of material life.

This combination of relative freedom in defining acceptable standards with their rigorous enforcement suggests that the fact of the violation was more important than its substance.[57] The rules were meant to foster—and gauge—group cohesion and identity and to distinguish Friends from their worldly neighbors. Decentralized rule setting also meant that no identifiably "Quaker" style of furniture developed.[58] The highly disparate work of Stephen Foster Stevens and John Needles shows clearly that tolerance—and the resulting standards for plainness—varied significantly from meeting to meeting. A balanced and complete picture of Quaker plainness will only come into focus as many individual studies such as this one, of Friends and their work in specific times and places, are brought together.

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Notes

Figs. 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7 were taken by the author. Figs. 2, 3, and 8 were shot by Ken Burris and are used with permission of the Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont.

1. William N. Hosley, Jr., "Vermont Furniture, 1790–1830," *Old Time New England* 72 (Spring 1987): 245–86; Kenneth Joel Zogry, *"The Best the Country Affords": Vermont Furniture, 1765–1850* (Bennington, Vt.: Bennington Museum, 1995). See Zogry for a complete bibliography on Vermont furniture.
2. Hosley, "Vermont Furniture," 251.
3. Rokeby is a historic house and farm museum documenting two hundred years in the life of a Quaker family, the Robinsons. The Stevens artifacts found their way to Rokeby through his daughter, Ann Stevens Robinson, who married into the family in 1870. All diaries, letters, and account books referred to in this article are in the Rokeby Collection. Letters are housed at the Sheldon Museum Research Center in Middlebury; everything else is at Rokeby Museum in Ferrisburgh. One ledger, which covers the same years as the day books in the Rokeby Collection, is in private hands

and was not available for this study.

4. For an interesting analysis of the impact of conservative context—though not religious—on furniture production, see Edward S. Cooke, Jr., "Craftsman-Client Relations in the Housatonic Valley, 1720–1800," *Antiques* 85, January 1984, 272–80.
5. Charles W. Hughes and A. Day Bradley, "The Early Quaker Meetings of Vermont," *Vermont History* 29 (July 1961): 153–67; Ellen C. Hill, *Revolutionary War Soldiers of East Montpelier* (East Montpelier, Vt.: East Montpelier Bicentennial Commission, 1975), 57–63; Margery Walker, "Early Friends in East Montpelier" (Typescript, Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier, Vt., 1976), 1.
6. See Jack D. Marietta, *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748–1783* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984); Frederick B. Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948); and William J. Frost, *The Quaker Family in Colonial America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), esp. Chaps. 3 and 10.
7. Of the eleven preparative meetings in Vermont in 1828, eight were in Addison County. Hughes and Bradley, "Early Quaker Meetings of Vermont," 165. The "hierarchy" of Quaker meetings is as follows: The meeting for worship, at the "lowest" end, was granted to a group of Quakers in an isolated area who wanted to gather for worship. If the meeting grew, it would request preparative status. Next would be the monthly, and above it the quarterly and yearly meetings. The monthly meeting was the basic unit for both worship and business, but disputes could be taken to the quarterly and, ultimately, the yearly meeting for resolution.
8. Bertha Hanson, "Quaker Meetings in Vermont" (Typescript notes, Rokeby Museum, Ferrisburgh, Vt., n.d.); H.P. Smith, *History of Addison County, Vermont* (Syracuse, N.Y.: D. Mason & Co., 1886), 451–52, 522.
9. Susan S. Forbes, "Quaker Tribalism," in *Friends and Neighbors: Group Life in America's First Plural Society,* ed. Michael Zuckerman (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1982), 145–73. Although writing of Quakers in mid-eighteenth-century Philadelphia, Forbes's description of how a small leadership group developed is relevant here.
10. Stevens became clerk of the Ferrisburgh Monthly Meeting Orthodox at the time of the Hicksite split. At that time the sitting clerk, Rowland T. Robinson of the Rokeby Robinsons, joined the Hicksites.
11. Although the lack of a "hireling ministry" was a major point of difference between the Religious Society of Friends and other protestant denominations, monthly meetings did "record" as ministers those who distinguished themselves as adept speakers. Of course, their speaking in meeting was only in response to and an expression of spiritual experience.
12. The most current work on Quaker religious and domestic life is Hugh Barbour and J. William Frost, *The Quakers* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988); older but still useful are vol. 1 of Rufus M. Jones, *The Later Periods of Quakerism* (1921; reprint, Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1970) and Elbert Russell, *The History of Quakerism* (New York: Macmillan, 1942). Also excellent is Frost, *The Quaker Family in Colonial America.* On Quakers in Vermont, see

Hughes and Bradley, "Early Quaker Meetings of Vermont."

13. Hughes and Bradley, "Early Quaker Meetings of Vermont," 155; Hugh Barbour, Christopher Densmore, Elizabeth H. Moger, Nancy C. Sorel, Alson D. Van Wagner, and Arthur J. Worrall, *Quaker Crosscurrents: Three Hundred Years of Friends in the New York Yearly Meeting* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995).
14. *Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of Friends, Held in New York, for the State of New York, and Ports Adjacent* (New York, 1810), Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pa.
15. Thomas Clarkson, *A Portraiture of Quakerism* (New York: Samuel Stansbury, 1806), 1: 48–49.
16. Barbour et al., *Quaker Crosscurrents,* 176.
17. This incident is documented primarily by the legal suit three farmers brought against Robinson. It is mentioned in a manuscript story written by Robinson's son, and a copy of a petition Robinson addressed to the state legislature on the matter is in the Rokeby Collection.
18. *Discipline of the Yearly Meeting,* 100.
19. Stephen Foster Stevens Diary, Montpelier, Vt., 1817–20, Rokeby Collection.
20. Quotations have been presented verbatim, with misspellings and other oddities of usage uncorrected.
21. Stephen Foster Stevens Diary, Monkton, Vt., 1821–22, Rokeby Collection. Also tucked into this diary are a letter to his father dated Aug. 27, 1820, and a separate signature recording an 1820 trip to Troy, N.Y., to attend Yearly Meeting.
22. Stephen Foster Stevens Account Book, Monkton, Vt., 1821–29; Stevens Account Book, Monkton and Montpelier, Vt., 1830–56, Rokeby Collection.
23. A distinction is made here between day books and account books. Day books were journals of original entry in which orders were noted chronologically as they were taken; account books consisted of individual accounts kept by name and had debits on the left-hand page and credits on the right. See Robert J. Wilson III, *Early American Account Books: Interpretation, Cataloguing, and Use* (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1981).
24. Stevens's account book notes many painting jobs; this might have been another one. The origin and date of this house are not known, but it was probably built before Stevens moved to the area.
25. Allen Davis to Stevens, Nov. 23, 1825, Stevens Family Papers, Rokeby Collection. Davis wrote to Stevens on behalf of a Berriah Swift who wished to employ him at machine making for two to three years and offered to pay fourteen dollars a month to start, with raises on improvement. Davis described it as an "excellent opportunity." My own tallying of receipts from the account books indicates that while there were some wide fluctuations, Stevens took in substantially more than fourteen dollars in most months.
26. I examined the records of Stillman Buss, Landgrove, 1831–44, and Elizur Peck, Cornwall, 1805–39, both at the Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier; John Houghton, Middlebury, 1810–19, and Nahum Parker, Middlebury, 1824–49, both at Sheldon Museum Research Center, Middlebury, Vt.

27. I want to thank staff at the Winterthur Library for checking sources in their collection in addition to the sources I checked: John Gloag, *A Short Dictionary of Furniture* (Woodstock, N.Y.: The Overlook Press, 1991); Luke Vincent Lockwood, *The Furniture Collector's Glossary* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1967); *Thomas Sheraton's Cabinet Directory* (New York: Praeger, 1970); and Joseph Aronson, *The Encyclopedia of Furniture* (New York: Crown, 1965). Aronson has stated that in American work "cricket" denotes a simple version; Sheraton pictures a swinging bed, but it is a crib meant for a child.
28. Frederick B. Tolles, *Quakers and the Atlantic Culture* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 73.
29. Marietta, *Reformation of American Quakerism,* Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House;* and Frost, *Quaker Family in Colonial America,* esp. Chaps. 3 and 10.
30. *Discipline of the Yearly Meeting,* 67.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 37.
33. Ferrisburgh Monthly Meeting, Men's Minutes, 1819–46, Friends Historical Library. The minute books are not paginated, but entries can be found easily by date; see 3rd of 7th mo, 1822 and 2nd of 4th mo, 1823.
34. Clarkson, *Portraiture of Quakerism,* 1: 265.
35. Amelia Mott Gummere, *The Quaker: A Study in Costume* (Philadelphia: Ferris & Leach, 1901), 183.
36. Gummere, *The Quaker,* 136–37.
37. Clarkson, *Portraiture of Quakerism,* 269.
38. Zogry, *"The Best the Country Affords,"* 27.
39. I found only one piece of Davis furniture referred to in the record: in 1810 he was asked to make a pair of writing tables for each end of the Montpelier meetinghouse (presumably for the separate men's and women's business meetings), for which he was paid ninety cents (Montpelier Preparative Book of Record, Beginning the 17th of 5th mo, 1803, Friends Historical Library; see record for 20th of 9th mo, 1810). Margery Walker identified the ash and butternut desk with walnut top in the collection of the Vermont Historical Society as one of those made by Davis. Stylistically, however, it appears to date from about 1850, and its Gothic Revival-style applied moldings were attached with round-headed screws. VHS records indicate it once belonged to Clark Stevens. See Walker, "Early Friends," 10, and Ellen C. Hill and Marilyn S. Blackwell, *Across the Onion: A History of East Montpelier* (East Montpelier, Vt.: East Montpelier Historical Society, 1983), 44.
40. Having grown rapidly since 1810, Middlebury was the only town in northern Vermont with a population of 2,500 in 1820 and was by then a very prosperous place. See T. D. Seymour Bassett, "The Leading Villages in Vermont in 1840," *Vermont History* 26 (July 1958): 177, and H. P. Smith, *History of Addison County,* 305–6. Hosley has said of the Hastings Warren secretary, "It could only have come from a place like Middlebury and testifies to that town's vitality as a cosmopolitan center." See "Vermont Furniture," 255.
41. I distinguished Quakers from non-Quakers by checking several sources, including the Ferrisburgh Monthly Meeting, Book of Register, 1829–46, and Ferrisburgh Monthly Meeting, Book of Records, 1828–49, Friends Historical Library; Ferrisburgh Monthly Meeting Minutes, Town Clerk's Office,

Ferrisburgh, Vt.; "Records of Births, Marriages and Deaths in the Society of Friends at Lincoln, Vermont," photocopy in the Vermont Historical Society; and Loren V. Fay, *Quaker Census of 1828: Members of the New York Yearly Meeting* (Rhinebeck, N.Y.: Kinship Press; 1989).

42. "John Needles (1786–1878): An Autobiography," *Quaker History* 58 (Spring 1969): 3–21.
43. Charles F. Montgomery, "John Needles—Baltimore Cabinetmaker," *Antiques* 105, April 1954, 294.
44. Montgomery, "John Needles," 294.
45. Ibid., 293, 294.
46. *Discipline of the Yearly Meeting,* 35.
47. Barbour and Frost, *Quakers,* 111, have stated, "Quakers also tended to prefer to do business with their co-religionists whom they thought were likely to be cautious and honest."
48. See note 41 for the list of sources checked to identify Friends and differentiate them from others among Stevens's customers.
49. Stevens to James Stevens, Apr. 18, 1830, Stevens Family Papers.
50. Bond of Indenture between Thomas G. Byrd and Stephen Foster Stevens, Feb. 7, 1831, and Apr. 2, 1835, Stevens Family Papers.
52. Stevens to John H. Byrd, June 7, 1835, Stevens Family Papers.
53. Stevens Account Book, 1830–56. This book is really two records in one, each starting at opposite ends of the notebook and upside down from each other. The earliest began in January 1830 and is a month-by-month record of furniture Stevens made until 1837. Then follow several credit and debit accounts for specific individuals from the 1840s to 1850s. When the book is turned upside down and over, a completely new form of record appears that began in January 1846 and ran until May 1856. This long section combines diary-like entries of trips made, visits of others, and deaths, as well as household and farm accounts.
54. Walker, "Early Friends," 14. Notice of the granted patent appears in an undated clipping from an unidentified newspaper in the archives at Rokeby Museum.
51. Deed, Stephen Foster Stevens to John Douglas, Sept. 4, 1836, recorded in Monkton Land Records, vol. 10, 215.Ferris & Leach, 1901), 183.
55. Recent studies of plainness in Quaker material life include Anne A. Verplanck, "Facing Philadelphia: The Social Meanings of Silhouettes, Miniatures, and Daguerreotypes, 1760–1860" (Ph.D. thesis, College of William and Mary, 1996); Susan Garfinkel, "Discipline, Discourse, and Deviation: The Material Life of Philadelphia Quakers, 1762–1781" (M.A. thesis, University of Delaware, 1986); and Leanna Lee-Whitman, "Silks and Simplicity: A Study of Quaker Dress as Depicted in Portraits, 1718–1855" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1987).
56. Verplanck, "Facing Philadelphia," 77–78.
57. Susan Garfinkel, "Discipline, Discourse, and Deviation," 32, found this to be true of the Philadelphia Quakers she studied.
58. Compare this to the Shakers, who lived in cloistered communities and had their work scrutinized and judged by a small, central leadership, resulting in the distinctive furniture they produced. John T. Kirk, *The Shaker World: Art, Life, Belief* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997).