

Provenance and the "Granny Notes" Factor

by Jeanne Schinto

I call them granny notes because so often an older woman in the family was the one who wrote them. Aware of memory's mortality or her own approaching death, she would pen the history of an object and attach it somewhere in or on it. If the object was a chair, her note might get pasted to its seat bottom. If it was a bureau, she might write it directly on the wood inside a drawer. And if it was a ceramic piece, she might just as easily fold up and drop the note into it.

Previously, these histories had been handed down in spoken words. You know the familiar phrase of the auction catalog and dealer's tag-"according to family tradition." Granny notes are these same stories incarnate. The trouble is, as many collectors and dealers already know, such notes often raise more questions than they answer.

No less a force in the antiques world than Israel Sack Inc. quoted from one of these notes in a 1961 ad that ran in *Antiques* magazine when the firm offered a table purported to have been the property of Benjamin Franklin. "An American Classic. Spanish foot gateleg dining table; Massachusetts, circa 1700-1720," the ad stated. "Walnut top, cherry base, 2 drawers, finest state of preservation." Under the table top, the ad continued, there was this inscription: "Mrs. E.B. Arnold, this table was the property of Benjamin Franklin." The note was supported by correspondence no less vague, but it too was quoted in the full-page presentation. "This history is supported by letters from Mrs. Arnold in 1923 attesting table purchased by her husband's grandfather, Judge Mark Langdon Hill (1772-1842) 'when the Franklin things were sold.'"

What should be done with these intriguing bits of somebody's recollection? We all know not to accept them unquestioningly, but neither should we simply dismiss them. Even if the scribe did recall some things incorrectly or exercise a little poetic license, her words still might contain a kernel of truth or lead the way to it.

At a Pook & Pook sale in Downingtown, Pennsylvania, on January 6 and 7, 2006, a 1760-80 walnut dining chair came on the market with a note pasted to its rear seat rail. "This chair once belonged to George Washington," the note began, then went on to recount how it had been removed from Arlington House, Arlington, Virginia, after Virginia seceded from the Union. A second note accompanying the lot referred again to Washington. This chair was "taken to Arlington House by George Washington's nephew ___ Parke Custis," it read. Also known as the Custis-Lee Mansion, Arlington House was the former home of George Washington Parke Custis, then of his daughter, Mary, who was married to Robert E. Lee.

But George Washington Parke Custis was Washington's adopted son, not his nephew. To add to the confusion, he had been Washington's step-grandson before the adoption took place. In any event, David Reese, director of Gunston Hall Plantation, the Mason Neck, Virginia, home of George Mason (1725-1792), was not convinced that the chair had a Washington connection. Instead, Reese said recently, he had "felt quite certain" that the chair had once belonged to "his" George.

Where had his certainty come from? "Even before it came up for auction, we already knew of the chair's existence, and that it was in the hands of a Pennsylvania collector-dealer," Reese said. "And we were confident that it was a match to the two George Mason chairs that we have on loan from a Mason descendant."

As for the "evidence" of the granny notes, Reese and his colleagues concluded that the writers of those notes had made an erroneous leap of logic. True, Washington was related to the Custises, but so was Mason. The belief is that the chair descended from him to his son John to his granddaughter Anna Maria, who married Robert E. Lee's brother Sidney Smith Lee. "And that's why we think the chair ended up in Arlington," said Reese.

Acting as agent for Gunston Hall, Judy Herteg, a Delaware collector active on the committee refurbishing the house, carefully previewed the chair at Pook & Pook, consulted with Reese, then placed the winning bid on the museum's behalf. The price was \$9945 (including the buyer's premium). The chair is now on exhibit at Gunston Hall, along with four other chairs, two of them being the ones on loan from the descendant.

"They're not exactly a set," Gunston Hall curator Caroline M. Riley said, "and only three are directly connected with Mason," that is, the loaners and the latest acquisition. "But they are all undoubtedly from the same shop, either English or Scottish, where there may have been multiple carvers, because some of the crests are very three-dimensional, compared to the others, which are simplified. They do look like a set to the public eye. They're in our most formal space, the Palladian Room, and look very beautiful together."

When asked if the note was still attached to the chair from Pook & Pook, Riley said, "Whether or not to remove it-that is the philosophical question, isn't it? Yes, it is still attached. The decision was to leave it on the chair. It's part of its history. This is a chair that has become, in many ways, identified in terms of that label. It's one of its identifying marks. And it's interesting, because, in some ways, it confirmed certain things of what we thought about the chair. And so, it enabled and disabled at the same time. The note helped us to understand where the chair has been and the life it had."

The most famous granny notes in the antiques world are "Nina notes"-my name for the ones that were written by Nina Fletcher Little. Dozens of them were transcribed and used as part of the descriptions for Sotheby's two-part sale of Bertram and Nina Little's folk-art collection in January and October 1994. Nina wrote notes and also saved any that came with objects that she purchased, using them as springboards for her research. The big difference between her notes and the usual ones is, of course, that hers can be counted on to be reliable. That granny was a scholar. Also, her notes often indicate not only who previously owned the object but who made it. Sometimes, too, she named the dealer from whom she had bought it and its price.

Sotheby's didn't reproduce any Nina notes in its catalogs. And so, I went to look at some at Cogswell's Grant, Essex, Massachusetts, the house that the Littles bequeathed, along with its contents, to Historic New England (formerly the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities). Exhibitions assistant Joanne Flaherty, who is the site's former manager, was my guide.

Many of the notes were written on jelly-jar labels. One of those that Flaherty showed me was affixed to the bottom of an extra-large molasses-brown sugar bowl. In blue-black ink in Nina's hand was written, "Belonged to Mary arter, wife of the first Osborne to make pottery in Boscawen, New Hampshire."

Sometimes Nina typed her notes. In fact, in the tiny (4' x 6') room that Historic New England calls Nina's Study sits a typewriter with a jelly-jar label curled in its roller. In a fluted bowl Flaherty found a good typewritten example for me to look at. "Wash bowl made by Uncle Joe Hazelton, just above what is now St. Paul's School, Concord, New Hampshire," it read.

In that same room were shelves of decoys, with handwritten Nina notes attached. One read, "Dowager snipe by Haywood Johnson 1863. Barneget, New Jersey." Another referred to two objects, stating, "Pair geese from Kenneth Harbor, Maine, carved by Gardner, pted. By Joe Lincoln?"

A jelly-jar-labeled herb pot with cover, dating from 1840-90, was not in its place on a shelf in another room, since it was traveling with the exhibition *Cherished Possessions: A New England Legacy*. A granny note was traveling with it. Flaherty had the text. "My Grandmother Libby Kept Cloves in this Antique Jug for over 50 years. It is very old," it read. Nina's own note about it stated, "Purchased in August 1944 from Mrs. Withington, Hillsboro Centre, N.H. (\$2.00)."

I was saddened by the condition of some Nina notes I saw at Cogswell's Grant. They were so fragile, written on paper that was never meant to last. Moisture from the air appeared to be dissolving the ink. Flaherty said that a few of them had lost their glue and fallen off the objects they described; she has them on file in the Historic New England office in Haverhill, Massachusetts.

Incidentally, there was no jelly-making going on at Cogswell's Grant, at least not by Nina. "On Wednesday, the cook had the day off," Flaherty told me as we stood in the pantry, "and so, on that day Mrs Little was responsible for the cooking." She pointed to the hot plate. "Legend has it that all she could cook were grilled-cheese sandwiches. She called them 'Cheese Dreams.'"

It's often remarked how much the business has changed since the collecting days of pioneers like the Littles. Certainly, dealers can no longer rely on a potential customer's indiscriminate acceptance of information provided by granny notes, much less on the old, oft-repeated family stories. Back in 1956, in advertising a circa 1790 mantel from a Virginia plantation house, Edwin Jackson, New York City, made this unsubstantiated claim in an *Antiques* ad: "The house is said to have been built by a relative of Patrick Henry."

But 16 years later, in a 1972 ad in *The Magazine Antiques*, Ellen Fales Lomasney, Long Island, New York, was already distinguishing between grannies who were reliable narrators and those who were not. "Responsible members of the family of the late owner are convinced that this piece has been passed down from generation to generation," stated her ad for a five-legged Chippendale mahogany gaming table made in New York in the mid-18th century.

"Documented evidence as to the original owners from whom it was inherited is now being sought," Lomasney's ad continued. "Research is being undertaken into the papers of various New York ancestors"-the "responsible" ones, I presume.

Long before that, Philip Flayderman was one dealer who understood the power of reliable narrators and of written words that go beyond mere granny notes. An ad in the December 1929 issue of *Antiques* announcing the sale of Flayderman's collection on January 2-4, 1930, stated that for 25 years he had been "systematically accumulating specimens of pedigreed family furniture," the majority of his acquisitions having been secured "fully supported by affidavits and other historical documents, directly from descendants of the original owners."

He left, in other words, nothing to the imagination, as the magazine's Shop Talk columnist noted in that same issue. "Whenever [Flayderman] acquired any particularly choice family heirloom," the anonymous columnist, pen-named Bondome, wrote, "he would insist upon obtaining a sworn statement of its history. Then he would stow away specimen and affidavit out of sight, and out of every mind except his own."

Flayderman's circa 1790 New England Hepplewhite mahogany sideboard is a case in point. Purported to have been owned originally by Josiah Bartlett, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, it was supplied with its "pedigree" by "an affidavit from its late owner, Hannah Bartlett Rollins of Rollinsford, New Hampshire, a lineal descendant of Josiah Bartlett."

Apparently, Jess Pavey of Birmingham, Michigan, a dealer who belonged to the generation that followed Flayderman's, liked the idea of affidavits too. In a Pavey ad in the November 1952 issue of *Antiques* for an early American spinet by John Malbone of Boston, the copy stated that it was "made for the Francis Malbone family of Newport, one of the most affluent families of the new world" and that a "copy of the affidavit regarding its ownership shows that it remained continuously in the possession of the Malbone family until the present."

An affidavit, by definition, is a written statement sworn to be true in the presence of someone authorized to administer an oath, such as a notary public. Was that what these dealers meant when they used the term? Whether they did or not, affidavits vary in quality, just like everything else. Wesley Cowan and Tukufu Zuberi of the television program *History Detectives* made that point in an episode about a sword purportedly presented by Napoleon to a young French soldier in recognition of his bravery in battle.

The soldier's family immigrated to Louisiana in 1815, and the sword was handed down four generations to two of his great-granddaughters, Inez and Isabelle Rousseau of St. Martinville, Louisiana. The Rousseau sisters wanted Cowan and Zuberi to discover whether the presentation story was true.

While Cowan showed the sword to some Napoleon experts, Zuberi studied an affidavit filed in the courthouse by one of the soldier's descendants. Family members are not very objective sources of information, Zuberi noted. What is more, the townspeople who signed the document had something to gain as well. Every town likes its local heroes.

In the end, Cowan and Zuberi gave the sisters good news and bad. The sword postdated the death of Napoleon in 1821, so their great-grandfather could not have received it from him, but French records showed that he did get a pistol from the emperor for bravery even greater than the family had thought.

The pistol has been lost. (The sisters think an uncle sold it.) As for the story of the sword, its debunking did not surprise Cowan. "Look, the minute I saw the sword-I mean, the minute-I knew that their family history was incorrect-period," he told me in a phone conversation not long ago, "because it wasn't from the right time frame."

Cowan then spoke more generally about provenance. "Written documentation, as you know, is still everything," he said. "It's the king; it's what you need to establish the chain of custody. That's the layman's term I prefer to provenance. Who has this belonged to for as far back as you can track it? That's what you want-an unbroken chain. And most of the time in the antiques business that's not possible to have. And that's why value is often added to antiques when you do have it."

"In most cases on *History Detectives*, there is no written documentation," Cowan went on. "It's only word of mouth. If I were going to give one piece of advice to collectors, it would be to find out from the dealer everything you can about where a piece came from and then make sure that you keep that information with the thing that you're buying."

He was, in short, advocating that we all write granny notes of our own.

Nina Notes

The cover of the catalog from Part I of Sotheby's sale of the Little collection, January 29, 1994. She is Mrs. James Blakeslee Reynolds of West Haven, Connecticut. Her portrait and that of her husband have been attributed to Reuben Moulthrop (1763-1814). There was neither a granny note nor a Nina note attached to either canvas, but the one that bore Mrs. Blakeslee's likeness was patched with a Connecticut newspaper dated April 21, 1797. The pair sold for \$745,000 (including buyer's premium) against an estimate of \$125,000/175,000.

Part II of the Little sale was held October 21 and 22, 1994. Below is a sampling of the Nina notes associated with objects at both sales:

o A jelly-jar label attached to the inside of the drawer of a Shaker red-stained birch drop-leaf table bore this handwritten inscription: "Shaker table from Enfield, N.H. From Ray Clifton, great grandson of Wm. Codman (?) who worked for Shakers in Enfield."

o A typed jelly-jar label inside the drawer of a Federal paint-decorated curly maple dressing table sold with a companion dressing box stated: "Dressing table and matching sewing box decorated by Sarah Bass Foster, (Daughter) of Reverend Edmond Foster, of Littleton, Mass. Later Married Rev. Wm. Hunt White." The Littles had bought it from Roland Hammond of North Andover, Massachusetts, in 1965.

o For a clock, Nina wrote out one label for the movement and another for the case. The label for the movement stated, "Clock works by 'George G. Brewster,' 1797-1872, b. Portsmouth, where he worked at clock making until became a dental surgeon. Brass plate behind wheel is engraved: G.G. Brewster, Portsmouth, N.H., 1834. Clock by Brewster are rare." The other label stated, "Clock case made & assembled by Thos. Gerrish Furber, born Sept 14, 1811. Married in Newington, N.H. to Eliz. Dow, 1837. Pencil ins. 'Maddisic & Warren' made by T.G. Furber, Newington, N.H. clocks' A desk by Furber is also known."

o Bert Little inherited 13 Chinese export and two Continental porcelain tea wares, circa 1765, 1785, 1825, and 20th century. Pieces with the monograms PB and JMB descended to the Littles from the family of Bert's great-grandmother Augusta Blanchard, who married David Kimball. The underside of a PB coffee cup was affixed with a paper label inscribed this way: "Wedding present to your great-great grandmother. Brought home from sea by her brother, Capt. Abram Waters, 1786."

o A Nottingham brown stoneware child's mug was affixed with two handwritten paper labels. One on the base was inscribed, "This belonged to Mrs Abijah Wyman Ashby Mass who died more than a hundred years ago she was your Great Grandma." The other stated, "Mrs Elizabeth Stearns Wyman 1792...."

o A Staffordshire glazed red earthenware jug, circa 1745, included a note that was neatly penned with phonetically spelled words, stating in part, "This tea pot I purchased soon after the Revolution war by Margaret Walton (Maden name Tison) to entertain company given to Martha A. Watsson (Maden name Ackley) wen a little girl to my first Grand daughter...."

o A Pilgrim Century carved and joined oak great chair bore this message: "Oak Armchair from Essex County, Bought by Uncle James Little from James Moulton, Lynn, in 1875 for \$26.50. Bought from Laura Little in 1946." It was signed "N.F. Little."