

The Chair That Made the Nation

by Jeanne Schinto

Windsor-Chair Making in America: From Craft Shop to Consumer

by Nancy Goyne Evans

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In March 1768 the sloop *John* entered the York River, south of the Patuxent and the Potomac, with a dozen Philadelphia-made Windsor chairs on board, destined for the homes of Virginians. Four months later the sloop *Florida* sailed from Rhode Island with low-backed and high-backed Windsors and "straw-bottom'd" chairs, a shipment meant for Maryland residents. By that time the chairs, whose design derived in part from the British craft tradition, had been produced in the colonies for more than two decades.

The early American economy was flourishing, and the colonists were fast outgrowing their status as mother country dependents. Is it too great a leap to say that the seating's success as a commodity helped to inspire some crucial political decisions that same year? The refusal of Massachusetts assemblymen to assist the British with tax collecting, for instance? Or the Boston citizenry's refusal to quarter British troops? An explicit cause and effect isn't possible to prove, of course, but a poetic case could be made that the Windsor was the chair that made the nation.

Furniture historian Nancy Goyne Evans has shown conclusively in two previous volumes, *American Windsor Chairs* (1996) and *American Windsor Furniture: Specialized Forms* (1997), that our history of Windsors should encompass not only chairs of simple stick-and-socket construction but all sorts of complicated plank-seated furniture. She has traced a line from the green-painted garden seating created in the 1720's for Windsor Castle to the increasingly idiosyncratic American products. The basic form had broken free in the workshops of the colonists. Cribs, cradles, highchairs, and potty seats; settees, benches, and stools; writing-arm chairs, barber chairs, chairs for invalids, and even seating for use in vehicles. Many of them were being created in the same moments that the colonists were planning and fighting for their own liberty.

Now the last of three immense volumes completes Evans's monumental 30-year study. In *Windsor-Chair Making in America* she documents how this most democratic of seating styles, owned by day laborers and statesmen alike, got built, sold, and used. She starts from its origins in Philadelphia in the 1740's. She follows its path through the 1790's, when inexpensive, all-purpose American Windsors of all types came into their own, evolving traceable regional characteristics. She ends in the 1850's, when craft workshops everywhere were dying out, giving way to factory production, which introduced to our nation's economy phenomenal products of its own.

Readers will find here a truly exhaustive exposition of Windsor craft methods, all the way from the sawing of the raw lumber to the stenciling and sprigging of the decorations on the final paint coat. More important, however, this is the story of how and to whom the products were marketed "overland and overseas." Part two of this volume, "Merchandising and Consumerism," is the most noteworthy component of the whole trilogy, the genuine tour de force. Comparatively speaking, much more is known about who made our antiques than who bought them when they were new. There can be no doubt that Evans's methods of ferreting out and presenting information will be used by the next generation of furniture historians who will apply it to important studies of their own.

Like the other two volumes, this one is of a size that requires its reader to sit at a sturdy table. Its weight, nearly six pounds, might put a carry-on bag over the limit for an airline flight. It has 286 illustrations. One chapter has 237 endnotes, while another has 291.

Evans was inventive when she chose her sources. Besides inventories, business account books, journals, diaries, local histories, estate records, ledgers, invoices, billheads, newspapers, and advertisements, Evans used ship manifests, custom house records, cargo invoices, and bills of disbursement. Sometimes the shorter, truncated records were more valuable than the lengthier, more complete ones, she writes, the misfortunes and unsatisfactory associations of craftspeople occasionally proving a boon, since business connections of short duration permitted her to date documented products precisely.

Evans's story does not depend on big-name personalities. There are none. David Alling of Newark, New Jersey, probably comes closest to exemplifying the successful Windsor chair maker in America. Lambert Hitchcock of Connecticut may be better known, but by the time he advertised an annual production of 15,000 chairs in 1831, he also had endured his share of financial ups and downs. Rather, this is the story of the unsung, day-to-day artisan. Its drama is built up from the minutiae of the quotidian, and it is told in almost microscopic detail.

Her information about workshop equipment, for example, is based in part on some 95 documents, principally chair makers' inventories from 1766 to 1877. Harvested from those pages are facts like the numbers of lathes in particular turneries (William Ryder's in New York had seven), the numbers of grindstones, shaving horses, sawhorses, and pieces of steaming and bending equipment. The discussion of saws alone includes the two-man pit saw, the crosscut saw, bow saw, handsaw, backsaw, panel saw, and, later, the circular saw, its invention and early use the subject of speculation. Most important, she discusses the tools specific to Windsor production—ones used for boring, for example, since round mortises, or sockets, anchor all the undercarriages and most of the chairs' backs.

We learn from Evans that about one-third of production time in the 18th-century workshop was consumed with preparation of the turned work in a Windsor chair. Time is money, and, not unexpected for a study of this kind, she details workers' wages. What is unexpected and delightful is that she also tells what workers wore. Lambert Hitchcock of Connecticut owned a pair of "India rubber" boots in 1852, estate records revealed to her; Thomas West of New London, Connecticut, cut a colorful figure in his "Plaid Cloak" in 1828; and both of them were wearing suspenders by the 1810's, though top hats were more often an urban article than a rural one for mechanics. Why is this important to know? Ask any clothing historian or teenage girl just how crucial a role clothing plays in the dynamics of the social hierarchy.

To relate how changing social, business, and political conditions affected the process of making Windsor chairs and the lives of those who made and used them is Evans's pervasive, underlying theme. After the American Revolution, for example, when demand increased for cheaper goods, the chairs' wooden seats with their finely modeled, contoured surfaces "succumbed to boxy planks with hard edges and little shaping," she writes. When apprentices grew scarce by the early 1800's, lured away by bigger opportunities in a country in which so many of these young men already seemed to have become "lost" (to judge from the prevalence of "runaway apprentice" ads in period newspapers), the complex baluster turning was replaced by a simple lathe-produced leg.

Evans situates these places of business with pinpoints on early maps. She locates the chair makers of Manhattan, shop by shop. "Shop location frequently was critical to a chair maker's success," she writes. Close proximity to public buildings was advantageous to some chair makers, but then again, density had its drawbacks. Once in 1819, Silas Cheney, located near the county courthouse in Litchfield, Connecticut, pursued the father of a neighborhood boy who had shattered his window, charging him 12 cents "for your Boy breaking Glass."

The anecdote is quaint, but Evans shows how quickly Windsor-chair makers abandoned the quaintness of one-man shops and began to trade in chair parts. "Exchanges of 'chair stuff' were common," she writes. Farmers earned supplemental income by providing chair makers with "sticks." A barter system grew up. "Occupational versatility" is the term she uses for chair makers who switched from one way of making a living to another and back, as needed.

Antiques dealers of today will want to study the map showing the distribution of woods used in Windsor chair planks in New England. Birch in Boston, maple in southern Rhode Island, and so on. There is, as well, a chart of paint colors, useful for helping to determine a Windsor chair's date. Green, the first Windsor color, so dominated the trade through the 1830's that "green chair" was synonymous with Windsor chair, she writes. Yellow begins in the late 1780's and continued to be used for the next 11 decades. Except for an appearance in 1784, black wasn't used until the 19th century, 1801 by the chart.

Then there is a color called coquelicot, a bright orange-red poppy hue. It is a choice rising in popularity for Windsors in 1809, when Stephen Girard of Philadelphia shipped a dozen chairs and a settee to South America aboard the *Voltaire*.

Where the Windsors went is the most original portion of Evans's study, and it is the one that yields the most astonishing information. Who would have thought, for example, that when the Spanish islands of the Caribbean finally opened to general commerce in the late 1790's, nearly 10,000 Windsors would enter the port of Havana in a four-year period from Philadelphia alone?

A manufacturing and marketing revolution, combined with developments in transportation, was responsible for bringing Windsor chairs to most corners of the world. They went along the eastern seaboard by way of schooners, brigs, and sloops. After the Erie Canal was completed, they started traveling via that route, not only south but north, to Canada. On longer trips, across the Atlantic or around Cape Horn, they made their way to the Pacific Northwest, to Europe, to both coasts of South America, and even to parts of Africa and Asia. Finally reaching their destinations, they went into every room in the house, from foyer to nursery.

By the 19th century, the railroad had created a new network of territory. From the terminals, they continued on by way of wagon, cart, and sled. Hitchcock himself looked over the inland market in 1835, traveling as far as St. Louis by horseback, stagecoach, and foot.

Hitchcock was one who auctioned chairs in large lots. Volume sales are another important part of this story. Multiple purchases were made by theaters, clubs, inns, taverns, and, later, mammoth resort hotels (the cruise ships of their day). Vintage photos of places like the dining room of Congress Hall in Saratoga Springs, New York, show acres of Windsors. This durable, economically produced seating also went into institutions: libraries, churches, schoolrooms, courthouses, and statehouses. "Almost nowhere in American public life was the Windsor more popular than in the statehouse," Evans writes.

How did customers pay for their chairs? Cash transactions were preferred but unusual. Exchanges of goods or labor were much more common. Martin Dudley paid Titus Preston of Wallingford, Connecticut, for a Windsor chair in 1797 by "threshing oats." Others paid chair makers with a three-year-old colt, "5 lb. Eales" (eels), shoemaking services, or a clock case. In the face of that evidence, it's clear that the successful chair maker's abilities must have extended to negotiating.

Repairs were another facet of the well-rounded chair maker's business. The complicated life of a Windsor chair might also include being repainted and redecorated over time. "In 1821, after more than fifteen years' operation, furniture in the Sans Souci Hotel at Ballston Spa, New York, was in considerable need of attention," we are told. As a result, William White repaired 150 chairs and repainted 469.

The habit of tipping backward is one reason why some Windsors got broken. That it is considered a male habit peculiar to Americans is another surprising fact we learned from Evans. "The practice of tipping backward in a chair was common among nineteenth-century American males," she writes. "The practice of balancing a chair on two legs was so engrained among American men even by 1805 that one traveler carried the habit abroad, much to the amusement of the Europeans." One of Evans's illustrations is an 1813-14 oil on canvas by John Lewis Krimmel that shows the tipping back style perfectly, if not patriotically, displayed by an adolescent boy sitting in a Windsor chair in a Pennsylvania tavern.