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## April 15th, 2011

# Treasures Great and Small: Portsmouth Furniture and a Dwarf Clock

by Jeanne Schinto



*Skinner Inc., Boston, Massachusetts*

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Photos courtesy Skinner

Before the start of Skinner's Americana sale on Sunday, March 6, dealer G.W. Samaha of Wellesley, Massachusetts, told the house's chief auctioneer and Americana department head Stephen Fletcher, "It looks like you're going to a memorial service." Bill Samaha's wry reference was to Fletcher's attire chosen for auction day—a dark suit. Sometime later, after bidders, including Samaha, had paid big prices for star lots, the dealer went up to Fletcher, who was taking a short break. "This is no memorial service," he said with a little smile, then went back to his seat.

By several measures, the sale was cause for reveling rather than mourning. The gross of \$2,366,861 (including buyers' premiums) was almost \$1 million more than what last year's March sale brought (\$1,420,608). "And I think it brought about half a million dollars over the high end of the estimate," Fletcher said. Actually, it went almost \$1 million over that too. Granted, Skinner estimates are sometimes so low they're almost meaningless. Nonetheless, the statistic stands, as does the impressive sell-through rate of 94.1% on the 596 lots offered.

One of Samaha's purchases was the top lot of the day. Going to him at \$314,000—more than ten times the high estimate—was an 1805-15 Portsmouth, New Hampshire, chest of drawers with rare reverse-serpentine front and slightly flaring tall French feet. His underbidder on the phone was his perennial rival, dealer Todd Prickett of Yardley, Pennsylvania.

Made of flame birch and mahogany veneer with ivory-inlaid escutcheons and retaining its original brasses, the chest is stylistically and structurally similar to an example illustrated in Brock Jobe's 1993

*Portsmouth Furniture: Masterworks from the New Hampshire Seacoast*. Jobe and other scholars who came to the previews believe the form to be exceedingly rare, but there's much more sleuthing to be done. After the sale we were alerted to one example with the same front and feet that is in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. (See the museum's 1998 catalog *American Arts at the Art Institute of Chicago, From Colonial Times to World War I*, pp. 117-18.) The piece came to the sale by descent in the Simes family, whose members were Portsmouth merchants during colonial times. According to Internet sources, one of them also held a political office, chairman of the town selectmen, in 1776.

The Simes descendants consigned a Portsmouth high chest too. Attributed to Joseph Davis, it went to unidentified phone bidder 1124 at \$59,250. According to the consignors, the 1735-50 carved walnut and walnut veneer high chest had belonged to John Wentworth (1737-1820), the British colonial governor of New Hampshire from 1767 to 1775. After he fled with his family to Halifax, Nova Scotia, with outstanding debts still owed in Portsmouth, the city auctioned the contents of the Wentworth home. The high chest was bought at that sale, the consignors said. Pertinently, the Portsmouth chest of drawers in the Art Institute of Chicago collection is inscribed "J. Wentworth" on its backboards. It's easy to surmise that the inscription refers to the same personage.

Another Portsmouth Queen Anne high chest—one from a Massachusetts family with early connections to Durham, New Hampshire—went to the same phone bidder 1124 at \$24,885 (est. \$3000/5000). It had been divided and fitted for use as two pieces, probably in the 19th century. A dressing table similar to the bottom piece is illustrated and discussed in Jobe's book about Portsmouth furniture (pp. 138-39). It had once belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Eddy Nicholson and was sold at Christie's sale of their collection on January 28, 1995, for \$103,700. According to Skinner, it was likely made by the same cabinetmaker who made this family's high chest. Scholars will decide.

Meanwhile, this high chest gives us an idea of what the original legs on the Simes high chest might have looked like, Fletcher observed. "On most of these pieces, the legs are wrong. On this second one, they were there, but it's amazing the thing stood up!"

Like the Portsmouth furniture, a circa 1700 painted pine and maple chest-on-frame made in Newbury, Massachusetts, attracted scholarly interest.

Deaccessioned by the Historic 1699 Winslow House in Marshfield, Massachusetts

(www.winslowhouse.org), the blue-gray chest had multiple signs of age, use, and disuse, but it also had great presence.

Written on the back in the same blue-gray paint were the words, "Made by Edmund Titcomb."

Jonathan Fairbanks and Elizabeth Bidwell Bates, who wrote about and illustrated this chest in their 1981 book *American Furniture: 1620 to the Present* (p. 52), identified the declaration as Titcomb's.

Written faintly on the top was another intriguing inscription, "Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Temple." It's likely that the words have to do with the chest's loan to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston from 1929 to 1935, said Stephen Fletcher.

Fairbanks, the MFA's Katharine Lane Weems Curator of American Decorative Arts and Sculpture Emeritus, was on hand at the previews. He and his co-author wrote that "the location of this key specimen of the cabinetmaker's art in New England was not known to furniture historians" as recently as 1969. Fletcher said it had been in the Marshfield institution since 1950. To the question of why it was being deaccessioned now, the auctioneer said, "It was not made in the region. It's in a fragile state. It should find its way to climate control." But will it? Only Bill Samaha, who bought it for \$213,300—more than twice the low estimate—knows for sure.

One item that Samaha tried for but did not get was an exceptional dwarf tall-case clock made by Joshua Wilder (1786-1860) of Hingham, Massachusetts, in a case attributed to Abiel White of neighboring Weymouth. Just 52" tall, the clock was acquired circa 1928 by Mrs. Robert Morse of Milton, Massachusetts, and descended in the family. Dealer Gary R. Sullivan of Sharon, Massachusetts, was the buyer, acting as agent for a private collector. The price was a very substantial \$189,600 (est. \$30,000/ 50,000).

Many previewers noticed the striking similarities between the Morse family's clock and the one once owned by Mrs. J. Insley Blair that was sold by Christie's on January 21, 2006, for \$108,000. As Fletcher remarked about their casework, "It would seem that Abiel White had a helluva nice piece of mahogany, and he was veneering two dwarf clocks with the same wood. Each has the same exact flame mahogany veneer on the waist door and in the panel on the bottom—it's the same piece of wood. There's a crack in the veneer in the exact same place. He was using veneer from a beautiful piece of mahogany that probably was being saved for a couple of nifty projects."

Sullivan, for his part, pronounced the clocks "identical twins." He was able to compare the two side by side before the sale took place because he was the buyer of the Blair clock at Christie's and five years later still had it in his possession. "I picked up the [Morse] clock at Skinner and brought it to my shop and put the two side by side," he said. "The dials are very slightly different, but the cases, doors, and bases all match each other. They're sliced from the same flitch."

Scrutinizing the Morse clock enabled Sullivan to solidify an opinion he had about a small oval patch in the door of the Blair clock. "I have always thought that patch was original because the grain is kind of a confused pattern there, and you can believe that there was a knot of some sort that had to be patched from day one. And then this [Morse] clock comes along, and it's got the exact patch in the exact same spot, so there was a flaw in the wood that had to be patched on both of them."

Speaking generally of dwarf clock forms, Sullivan said these two have the most desirable form—a French foot case, quarter columns, and a removable hood. "On most of the others, you open up the back of the clock to access the movement. This is an exact miniature of a tall-case clock."

Sullivan said he bought the Blair clock for his own collection. He has, however, "recently brought it out and offered it for sale." The Blair clock, he continued, "is a very nice example, but the condition is not as good as this one. [The Morse clock] is the cleanest example to come up publicly in generations." One more detail that attests to that fact is the winder that came with it. "It's a sweet little thing that doesn't add any value particularly, but as a clock scholar, I just love to see that. The clock was so well cared for that it still retained its wonderful, hand-wrought original winder."

No other great clocks were on offer, but a great example of a Pennsylvania spice box and an excellent William Bradford painting rounded out the highlights of this well-edited sale. The compass-inlaid spice box was made of the unusual combination of tiger maple and black walnut. Probably a Chester County example, it sold for \$106,650 (est. \$30,000/50,000) to dealer Philip W. Bradley of Newtown, Pennsylvania, who was bidding in the room for a client.

The 1853 ship's portrait, *The Whaleship "Speedwell" of Fairhaven Outward Bound Off Gay Head*—an early one by Bradford—was in its original frame. The consignors were descendants of the ship's first and only master, Benjamin J. Gibbs. The ship's log of 1857-61 accompanied the lot. Many competed for this excellent package. One of the phone bidders bought it for \$248,000 (est. \$100,000/150,000).

Fletcher said the painting was in "as close to perfect condition as you could ask for." Later he expanded on the subject of perfection. "Not everything can be absolutely perfect," he said. "If something's absolutely perfect, it brings the sort of money the Portsmouth bureau brought, so the disparity between something with a flaw and the perfect example...You want to talk about an opportunity to buy? It's huge."

The auctioneer noted one such opportunity in a "terrific Boston table." The figured maple and pine worktable was paint-decorated by Sarah Eaton Balch of Dedham, Massachusetts, at Mrs. Rowson's School, Boston Neck, Roxbury, Massachusetts, 1798-1810. The consignors bought it at part II of Sotheby's sale of the Bertram K. Little and Nina Fletcher Little collection on October 21 and 22, 1994, for \$17,250. It's pictured in the famed folk collectors' 1984 book *Little by Little: Six Decades of Collecting American Decorative Arts*, p. 217, plate 291.

What a wonderful provenance, but some complained that the table's paint was worn. Estimated at \$15,000/25,000, it opened from the desk at \$14,000 after which there was only a little competition from the Internet, where it sold for \$16,590 (the Internet fee brought it to \$17,290).

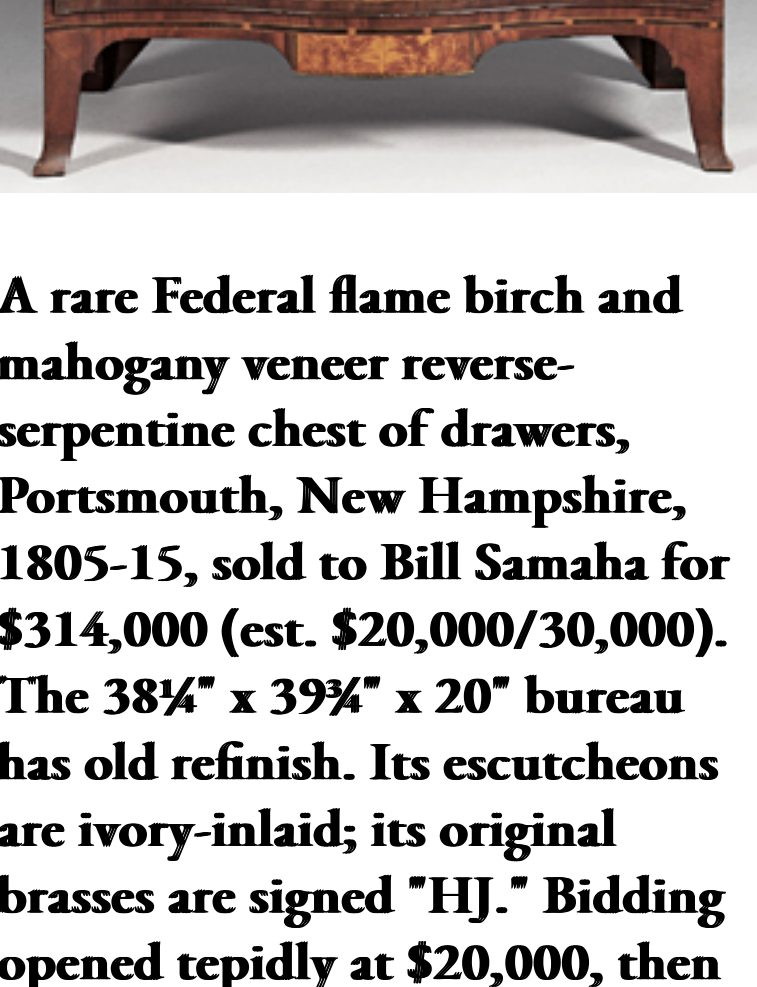
The cover lot of this sale was an unusual item, a working model of "Red Jacket," a 19th-century American hand-drawn and hand-pumped fire engine, celebrated in its day. The full-size firefighting machine, with serial number 364, was made by L. Button & Co., Watford, New York, in 1854. A late 19th-century chromolithograph depicting it bears the inscription: "Engine of the Red Jacket Veteran Firemen's Association, Cambridge, Mass./ Champion of the New England League 1894./ Awarded the Prize For Being the Handsomest Engine at N.E. League Tournament Held at Hartford, Conn. Sept. 12th 1895." Outfitted with buckets, a main engine lamp flanked by an eagle figure, rubber hose, lanterns, and nozzles, the model sold for a mid-estimate \$53,325 to a private collector bidding as an absentee.

"The buyer has vintage firefighting material," said Fletcher. "He left a bid, then called a couple of days later and upped it, and if he hadn't done that, he wouldn't own it."

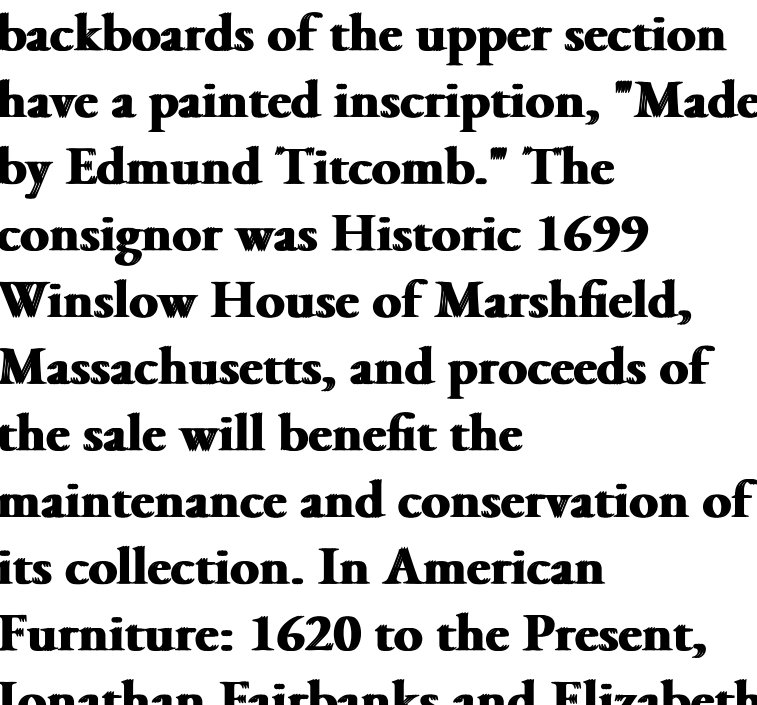
From the same consignors' collection came some good painted leather fire buckets and a firefighter's painted stovepipe hat. They had belonged to Colonel Rockwell Campbell Tenney of Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, who had sought out memorabilia associated with civil service. He and his wife also collected scrimshaw, marine and whaling artifacts, and American furniture. His daughter Nancy Tenney Coleman wrote a catalog tribute that concluded, "The house and the life that they created together were filled with family and friends who delighted in sharing my parents' sense of fun and eclectic style of collecting."

For more information, phone Skinner at (617) 350-5400 or see the Web site (www.skinnerinc.com).

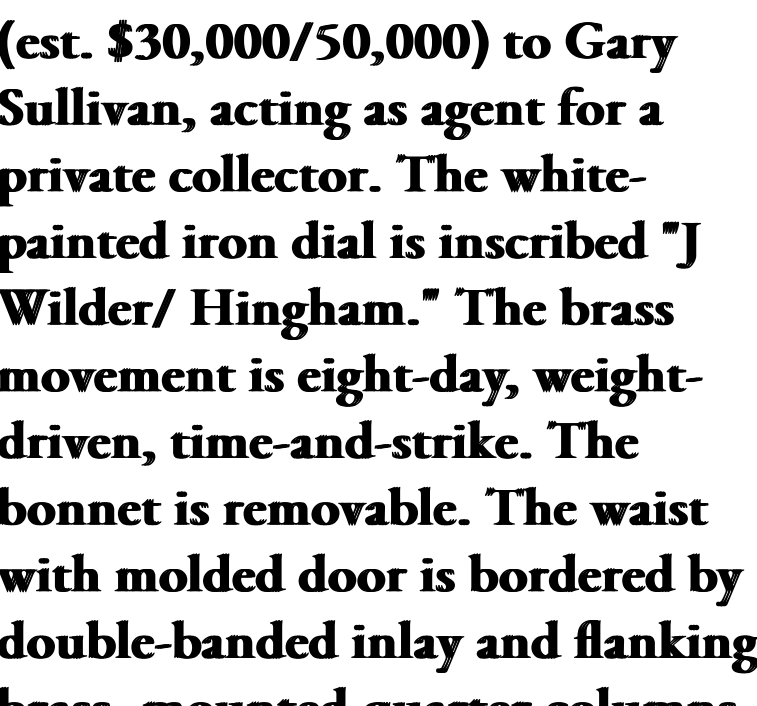
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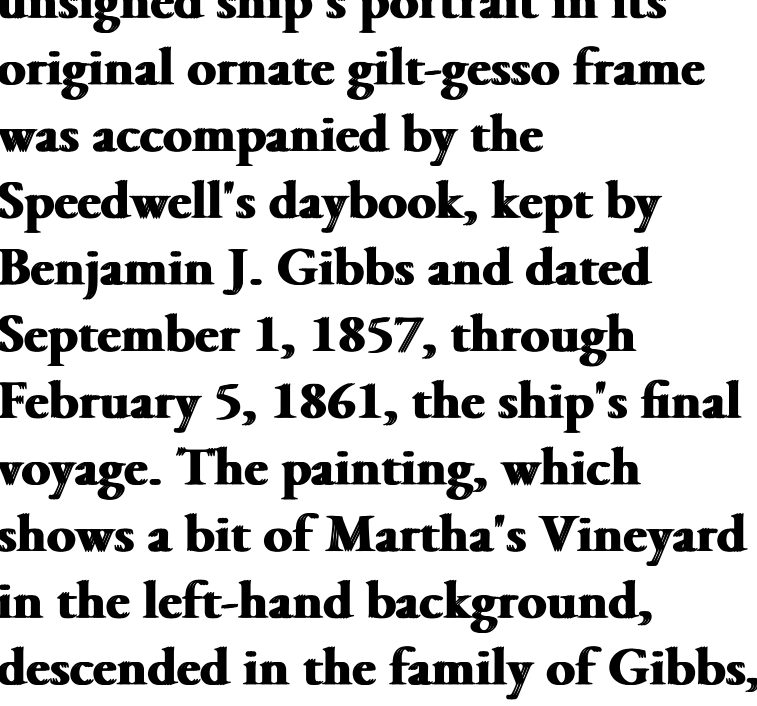
**A rare Federal flame birch and mahogany veneer reverse-serpentine chest of drawers, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1805-15, sold to Bill Samaha for \$314,000 (est. \$20,000/30,000). The 38¼" x 39¼" x 20" bureau has old refinsh. Its escutcheons are ivory-inlaid; its original brasses are signed "HJ." Bidding opened tepidly at \$20,000, then the phones began. Samaha appeared out at \$250,000. The most persistent phone bidder, who turned out to be Todd Prickett, went one more. Samaha decided to jump back in, and the bureau was his.**



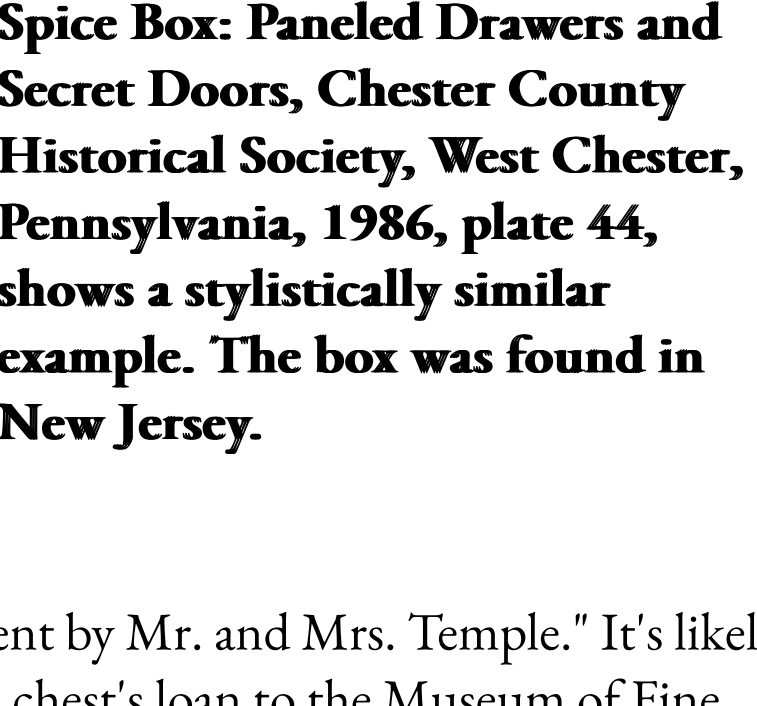
**The sale's éminence grise was this circa 1700 painted pine and maple chest-on-frame made by Edmund Titcomb (d. 1723) of Newbury, Massachusetts. It sold to Bill Samaha for \$213,300 (est. \$100,000/ 150,000). The 51¼" x 42" x 21¼" chest has old surface, one original brass pull, and original escutcheons. The backboards of the upper section have a painted inscription, "Made by Edmund Titcomb." The consignors was Historic 1699 Winslow House of Marshfield, Massachusetts, and proceeds of the sale will benefit the maintenance and conservation of its collection. In American Furniture: 1620 to the Present, Jonathan Fairbanks and Elizabeth Bidwell Bates discuss the piece (p. 52), recognizing it as "one of the rare signed and documented examples of the second major style of furniture-making in this country."**



**A 52" tall 1821-24 mahogany and mahogany veneer dwarf clock by Joshua Wilder of Hingham, Massachusetts, its case attributed to Abiel White of Weymouth, Massachusetts, sold for \$189,600 (est. \$30,000/50,000) to Gary Sullivan, acting as agent for a private collector. The white-painted iron dial is inscribed "J Wilder/ Hingham." The brass movement is eight-day, weight-driven, time-and-strike. The bonnet is removable. The waist with molded door is bordered by double-banded inlay and flanking brass-mounted quarter columns on a conformingly inlaid base and flaring French feet joining a scrolled apron. "It was truly the best dwarf clock we've sold," said Stephen Fletcher. "Hence, the price."**

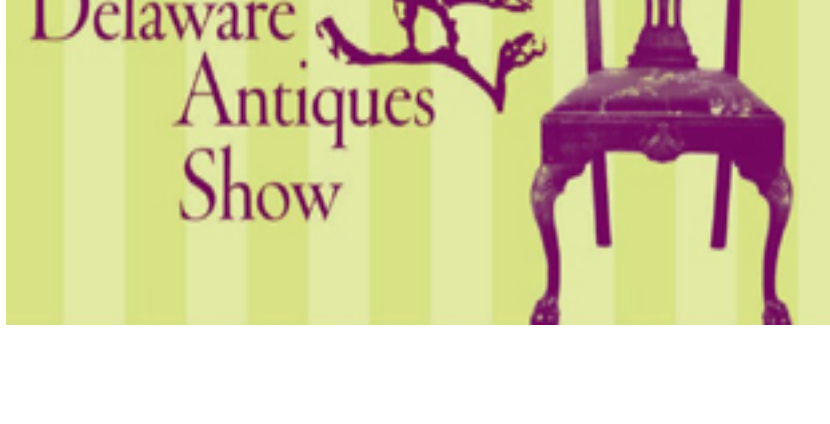
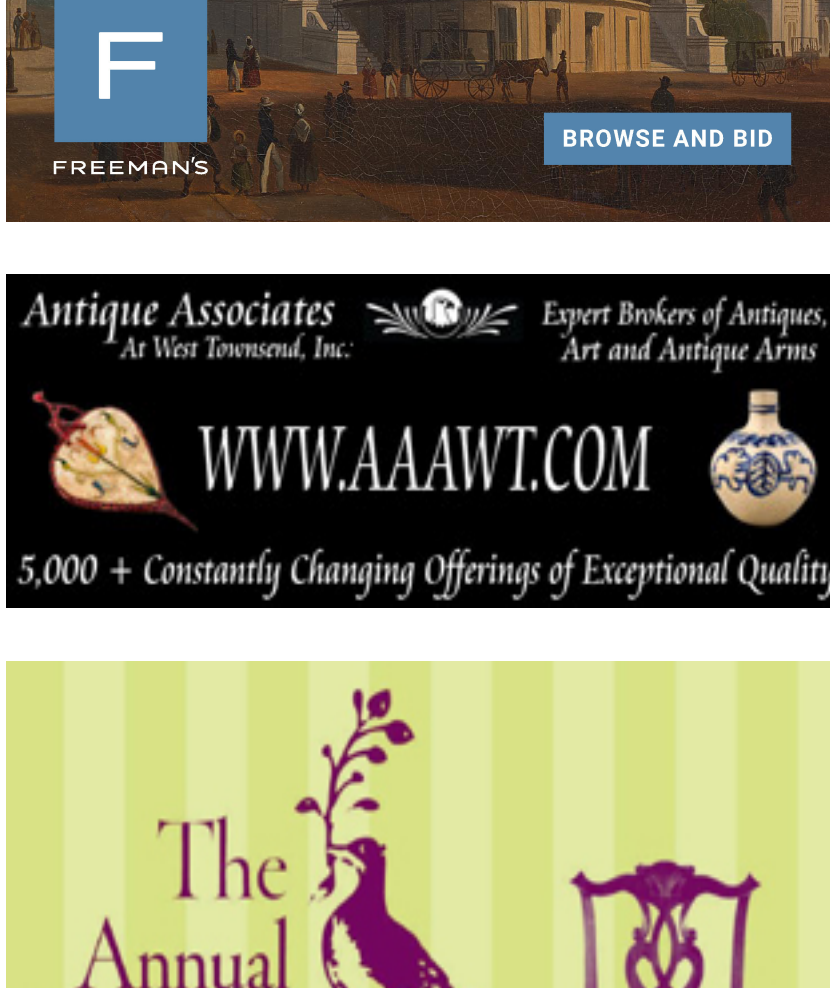


**The unsigned ship's portrait in its original ornate gilt-gesso frame was accompanied by the Speedwell's daybook, kept by Benjamin J. Gibbs and dated September 1, 1857, through February 5, 1861, the ship's final voyage. The painting, which shows a bit of Martha's Vineyard in the left-hand background, descended in the family of Gibbs, the ship's first and only master, and has been exhibited at the New Bedford Whaling Museum in New Bedford, Massachusetts. According to the Ship Registers of New Bedford, Massachusetts, vol. II, 1851-1865, p. 243, the Speedwell was built at Fairhaven, Massachusetts, in 1853, the same year Bradford painted her.**



**A 21 7/8" x 18¼" x 12¼" tiger maple and walnut compass-inlaid spice box, probably Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1750-70, sold for \$106,650 (est. \$30,000/50,000) to dealer Philip W. Bradley. The central compass design is in walnut, red cedar, locust, and holly stringing, with corner berry motifs. The centering initials, "DH," are framed by double herringbone borders of red cedar and locust. The door (shown above right) opens to an interior of ten tiger maple drawers centering a single walnut drawer. The Pennsylvania Spice Box: Paneled Drawers and Secret Doors, Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pennsylvania, 1986, plate 44, shows a stylistically similar example. The box was found in New Jersey.**

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