

Recent Discoveries: A Signed Desk by Robert Lawton Jr.

Jeffrey Greene ©2012

The 2012 discovery of a desk by Newport cabinetmaker Robert Lawton Jr. (1772-1853) gives new insight into the work of this little-known craftsman. The name of Robert Lawton Jr. is familiar to researchers as one of the many cabinetmakers known to have been working in post-Revolutionary war Newport, but examples of his work are scarce. He is listed in Bjerkoie's *The Cabinetmakers of America*¹, Garrett's 1958 checklist of Newport cabinetmakers², and Carpenter's *Arts and Crafts of Newport Rhode Island*³. He was also active in town and state civic affairs, so his name appears with some frequency in historical records.



Figure 1. Desk by Robert Lawton Jr., 180?; cherry, white pine, chestnut; 38" w, 21½" d, 43 4/3" h, private collection

¹ Edith Hall Bjerkoie, *The Cabinetmakers of America*, Bonanza Books, New York, 1957, p. 143

² Wendell D. Garrett, *The Newport cabinetmakers: a corrected check list*, the Magazine Antiques, Vol. LXXIII No. 6, June 1958, p. 558-559

³ Ralph Carpenter, *The Arts and Crafts of Newport Rhode Island*, the Preservation Society of Newport County, 1954, p. 25



Figure 2. Drawer detail showing Lawton’s distinctive “beveled and blocked” construction

The signed desk by Robert Lawton Jr. is made of cherry with white pine and chestnut secondary woods. It measures 38” wide and 21½” deep at the case and stands 43¾” tall. The drawers feature a “beveled and blocked” construction (fig. 2) mentioned by Carpenter in his description of a labeled Lawton breakfast table. To be more specific, the drawer bottoms are chamfered and slide into grooves in the drawer sides and front where they are then fixed in place with a series of small glue blocks. This construction is different from typical 18th-century Newport “through-bottom” drawer construction and seems to be Lawton’s individual style.

The signature is in ink on the underside of the right center valance drawer and has the fragment of a date: *J... 180... R Lawton Jr.* (fig. 3) The ink has faded but the impression of the pen nib is visible with a magnifying glass under low-angle light. It is easily overlooked.



Figure 3. R. Lawton Jr. signature enhanced (left) and as seen (right)

The Lawton desk is immediately recognizable as having a Newport origin; the ogee bracket feet are similar to those of the best examples of the Goddard and Townsend school (fig. 4) and the base molding has an ogee profile typical of Newport examples. The proportions of the case are also typical of Newport designs, being nearly equal in case height and width (though not as deep as other Newport desks). On closer examination there are structural details that are of the Newport style developed in the mid-18th century. A central vertical support braces the back of the desk interior, extending from the bottom of the case to the underside of the writing surface. Like other Newport pieces, the bottom of the case is flush with the base molding and the feet are attached to the underside of the case with large corner blocks and glue blocks.



Figure 4. Lawton desk foot detail and internal construction showing rear vertical support for interior

The desk has an interior that is reminiscent of the layout of typical Newport desks with blocked interiors, with a block-and-fan prospect door, three pigeonholes with valance drawers, and block-and-fan flanking drawers (fig. 5). It varies in that the layout also includes two long drawers at the bottom on either side of the prospect door. There is no convex blocking; the prospect door and flanking drawers have shallow concave blocking, under $\frac{1}{4}$ " deep. The three straight-ray fan carvings are simple and shallow, each with eleven undulating rays. The fans and blocking are so shallow they were at first thought to be a later addition, but maker's marks indicate they are original. The interior drawers are numbered for correct positioning.



Figure 5. Lawton desk interior

The piece is in solid and usable condition and retains most of its original components. There are an average number of restorations and repairs to drawer lips, the lid, feet, and the prospect door to repair losses due to normal use and shrinkage. The rear foot brackets and glue blocks appear to be early replacements and two drawer runners are new replacements. The brass drawer pulls and escutcheons are modern replacements made to fit the existing post holes and are of the same style as those on Lawton's labeled table.

Lawton was one of many lesser-known Newport cabinetmakers in postwar Newport who did not achieve the success or notoriety of late-century members of the Goddard or Townsend families, but who worked contemporaneously with them and were influenced by the mid-century Newport style. The fact that all the pieces associated with Robert Lawton are plain and simple speaks to the demand for practical and stylish furniture affordable to the average Newporter that cabinetmakers like Lawton endeavored to fill.

Bjerkoe mentions a privately-owned table by Lawton in the Hepplewhite style dated 1794 and notes his location as being on Broad Street at that time. Carpenter shows a mahogany breakfast table bearing the 1798-dated label of Robert Lawton Junior⁴ (fig. 6). The Carpenter table is in a simple Hepplewhite style

⁴ Ibid, p. 86



Figure 6. Breakfast table in mahogany by Robert Lawton Jr., 1798 and label

with drop leaves, tapered legs, a single drawer, and no inlaid detail. Carpenter, who owned the piece, described its workmanship as “above average” though the table possessed “no special merit”. The label advertises Lawton’s cabinetmaking business on Spring Street and mentions he *Also has on Hand the new-Invented Spring, Crimping, Press and Crimping Boards – with several kinds of portable Writing Desks*. The *No. 33* on the label suggests he made these in quantity. Carpenter also shows one of a set of four mahogany chairs (fig. 7) in a simplified Newport Chippendale style associated by family tradition to Robert Lawton.⁵



Figure 7. One of a set of four side chairs associated with Robert Lawton Jr. by family tradition

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 34

The dates of these tables coincide with information on Lawton's land transactions enumerated in his biography in the Rhode Island Furniture Archive at the Yale University Art Gallery. This record shows that Lawton bought the Broad Street land in 1793 and later bought the Spring Street land in 1798. The following year he sold the Broad Street location and advertised his move in Newport's *Weekly Companion* newspaper:

*Robert Lawton, Jun. CABINET-MAKER, Takes this method to inform his Friends and Customers, that he has removed from Broad-Street, and now carries on said Business in its various Branches, in Spring-Street*⁶

These were busy years for Lawton: In 1799 he was a representative to the Rhode Island General Assembly⁷, and in 1800 he married Sarah Anthony, daughter of Elisha and Mary Anthony⁸. In 1801 he advertised in the Rhode-Island Republican: *Wanted Immediately, 2000 Bushels good clean BARLEY, to be delivered at Newport, for which Cash will be paid on delivery*⁹.

While Lawton carried on the trade of cabinetmaking, it is clear that his business also relied on selling other merchandise and whatever commodities he thought he could profit from. Such was the cabinetmaking trade in postwar Newport. After the three-year British occupation from 1776-1779, Newport's population was reduced by half and one-third of the buildings had been dismantled for firewood. Rhode Island's primary center of commerce shifted from Newport to Providence, and with a severe postwar recession, Newport was a shadow of its previously prosperous self. Before the war, Newport had a flourishing cabinetmaking trade, some of it for an affluent Newport market, and some for shipment to other colonial cities and the West Indies. After the war, both the Newport market and coastal trade were greatly diminished, leaving local cabinetmakers with a much more difficult form of livelihood than in the booming prewar years.

Lawton again had land transactions in 1802 and 1803, this time selling parcels.¹⁰ His various business practices (it is not known which) landed him in hot water with the Society of Friends (Quakers), who disowned him in 1804 for his failure to manage his business interests.¹¹

⁶ *Weekly Companion*, "Robert Lawton, Jun. CABINET-MAKER," March 23, 1799, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>, <http://rifa.art.yale.edu>

⁷ *The Newport Mercury*, "Newport," April 30, 1799, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>, <http://rifa.art.yale.edu>

⁸ *Vital Record of Rhode, Island, 1636-1850*. <http://www.NewEnglandAncestors.org>, <http://rifa.art.yale.edu>

⁹ *Rhode-Island Republican*, "Wanted Immediately," November 7, 1801, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>, <http://rifa.art.yale.edu>

¹⁰ *Newport Deeds* vol. 8, 574-575, 746-747. City Hall, Newport, Rhode Island, <http://rifa.art.yale.edu>

¹¹ *Monthly Meeting*, April 1804, Society of Friends, *Rhode Island Monthly Meetings 1773-1799*, 129. Newport Historical Society, Newport, Rhode Island, <http://rifa.art.yale.edu>

Lawton continued to be active in Newport and was elected "Surveyor of Lumber, including Shingles and Clapboards" in 1812¹², a position that many in the cabinetmaking trade held at various times as part of their civic duty. In his later working years, 1817 and 1829, he is recorded as having made coffins, an essential item but often a fallback product for cabinetmakers.¹³

Lawton died in 1853 and is buried in the Fenner-Lawton lot on Plainfield Pike in Thornton (Cranston) Rhode Island with other family members. He is noted as being formerly of Newport.¹⁴

Were it not for the chance discovery of Lawton's modestly written inscription, he would be known only for two simple breakfast tables. The signed desk moves him into the category of a cabinetmaker with a fuller range of cabinetmaking skills, a larger repertoire, and a more affluent clientele than had been previously known. He is no doubt responsible for more of Newport's plain but stylish mainstream furniture in the postwar years than previously known, and a keen eye may reveal more of his work.

¹² The Newport Mercury, "Town-Officers," June 13, 1812

¹³ Thomas Shaw estate account, December 7, 1817, Newport Probate vol. 5, 436. Phillip Weeden estate account, 1817, Newport Probate vol. 5, 464. City Hall, Newport, Rhode Island, <http://rifa.art.yale.edu>

¹⁴ Rhode Island Historical Cemetery Commission, <http://www.rihistoriccemeteries.org>