

The Slater Family Tall-Case Clock

Jeffrey Greene ©2014

A simple inscription and a complete family history revealed a fascinating story of a tall-case clock and the many people associated with it.

The story begins with the owners of a tall-case clock inquiring about replacing its missing finials. They thought it was an important clock, though they were short on the specifics of the piece. It had been in their family for over 200 years and its provenance was well documented. It had originally been owned by Rhode Island mill owner Samuel Slater (1768-1825) and had descended through the family from him.



They were correct, it was an important clock. It was not only a period piece, but it was a Newport clock as well (left). There was no mistaking it for anything else; this was a textbook Newport example with the elegant austerity of Newport furniture rendered in handsomely swirled San Domingan mahogany. The focal point of the piece was a carefully carved Newport shell topping the blocked waist door. The bonnet featured an arched pediment with double moldings over fluted columns and the arched dial door. It was complete except for the finials. It had plinths for two finials on either side of the bonnet but never had a center plinth or finial, likely an original concession to low ceilings.

The clock retained its original movement and painted iron dial. The brass pendulum bob (below) was engraved with the name of the clockmaker:

*Charles Robbins
Pawtucket*



At the back of the case, behind the pendulum and weights, were the remnants of an illegible chalk inscription. It was not a formal inscription of any kind, more of a quick note written in an awkward place, sloping downhill and running out of room. I couldn't make out what it read, and apparently no one else had either. Decades previously, the clock had been through a major New York auction house and no one thought the inscription was worth investigating further. It had also been sent out for professional repairs and conservation work and no one had paid attention to the cryptic inscription then, either.



Chalk inscription on back board of tall-case clock. *Steph'n* (left); *Goddard of his manuf* (right).

Whenever I find an inscription I know that someone had made a deliberate effort to record something they thought was important. I feel obligated to make a deliberate effort to find out what it says.

Since this was now a very important clock, I photographed it extensively and photographed the chalk inscription in the back of the case the best I could. Sometimes these markings reveal themselves with some digital enhancement.

A high-contrast negative image of the inscription helped a little, enough to confirm what I thought I was seeing: the name *Steph'n Goddard* followed by a few other words. It seemed curious that the contraction of Stephen didn't save him much room, but that's what it said. Stephen Goddard was a son of Newport cabinetmaker John Goddard, and he and his brother Thomas continued the family cabinetmaking business after his father's death in 1785. I printed the inscription out as large as possible, took it to the workshop, tacked it to the wall and waited for the rest to reveal itself. This was exciting enough already, like finding a real Stradivarius or an undiscovered Monet. There were five words altogether, and it didn't look like anything familiar. Usually names are followed by a date or a location, but this was something different. I went back to my work, glancing at the image occasionally, and eventually saw it as:

Steph'n Goddard of his manuf

And that was where the writer ran out of room in the narrow clock case. Could this be from the Latin *manus* for *of his hand* or *by his hand*? It seemed doubtful that Stephen Goddard, born in Newport and raised during the brutal British occupation had such a classical education as to use Latin terms with ease. Clockmakers liked to use *tempus fugit* with impunity and cabinetmakers used *fecit* often enough, but neither were common parlance in Newport. The only thing that made sense in the context of the piece and the era was that it was an abbreviation for

manufacture: *Steph'n Goddard of his manufacture.*

We now had a case made by a member of a famous Newport cabinetmaking family with a movement made by a Pawtucket clockmaker; and just how the two came to be memorialized in this piece is fascinating.

In the years leading up to the Revolution, Newport was at its peak as a center of commerce, the fourth largest colonial city, with shipping, furniture-making, and rum distillation as its major industries; but the war changed everything. The British occupied Newport from December 1776 until October 1779. Commerce ground to a halt, half the population fled, and one third of the town's buildings were torn down for firewood.

During this tumultuous time, Stephen Goddard had grown up and come of age. He had been born in 1764, the 12th of John and Hannah Goddard's sixteen children. Cabinetmaking ran in the family's blood. John Goddard learned the cabinetmaker's trade as an apprentice of Job Townsend Sr., one of the founders of the Goddard Townsend cabinetmaking dynasty in Newport, and married into the family when he wed Job's daughter, Hannah. Job Sr. trained Goddard along with his own sons Job Jr., Edmund, and Thomas, each of whom became an accomplished cabinetmaker in his own right.



John Goddard house and shop on Washington Street, watercolor by Jonas Bergner, 1895, Newport Historical Society

Like many of John Goddard's sons, Stephen trained as a cabinetmaker in his father's shop (left). The shop adjoined the back of the family home on Water Street (now Washington Street) in the Quaker lands, or Easton's Point section of Newport, abutting Narragansett Bay. Some of the oldest Goddard sons, Daniel, Henry, and Job, trained and worked with their father during the busy years before the war. Daniel, the oldest, was a gifted carver, and his work contributed to making the products of the Goddard family shop among the best made in Newport.

When the British withdrew from Newport in 1779, many of those who remained loyal to them left for the British stronghold of Nova Scotia. Many of those who left did so for fear of reprisals or to avoid the disorder they expected to ensue. The oldest three Goddard sons were among those who chose to leave. It is not known whether they acted on strong loyalist sentiments or if they simply wanted to ply their trade under the stability of British rule. Daniel, Henry, and Job Goddard never returned to work in Newport and were listed as cabinetmakers in Sherborne County, Nova Scotia into the 1780s.

The sons' departure meant that John Goddard lost his most able journeyman, Daniel, and his two apprentices, Henry and Job. He was left with his younger sons Townsend, age 29, and Stephen, age 15, and Thomas, age 14. Townsend Goddard had been working independently of the family shop on Water Street and had previously worked across the bay in Kingstown, where opportunities were likely more promising than in occupied Newport.

The post-occupation years were difficult ones in Newport. Not only had the town and its population been greatly diminished, but the center of commerce had shifted to Providence, which had remained unoccupied. In addition, a post-war depression followed, leaving Newport a shadow of the bustling seaport it had been.

In spite of this hardship, Townsend Goddard continued to work on his own and Stephen and Thomas continued to learn their trade in the family shop. Their father and shop master John Goddard died in 1785, leaving Stephen and Thomas, then ages 21 and 20, to work on their own with the responsibility of supporting their mother and younger siblings. As John Goddard wrote in his will:

I give and bequeath to my two Sons Stephen and Thomas Goddard all my tools of every kind which I used to work with in carrying on by business, I also give to my said two Sons Stephen and Thomas the use and benefit of my shop, where I used to work, so long as their mother shall live in consideration of their working up the Stock of Mahogany &c. for their mother in such Furniture as will be most profitable and when worked up, to be appropriated as aforesaid.

Along with Newport and the Goddard family shop, the nature of the furniture-making business had changed greatly from before the war. Previously, Newport was a prosperous domestic market for its own furniture products as well as a busy port from which furniture was exported to other coastal cities and the West Indies. With its diminished prosperity during and after the war, cabinetmakers were left to seek other markets and methods by which to sell their pieces and Providence was the closest major market.

In the years before the war, the leading Newport cabinetmakers were busy enough to spend most of their time filling orders for customers. Since demand ran ahead of production, their furniture was made on a custom basis to customers' orders, and there was not an inventory of unsold work. With a decline in demand, cabinetmakers continued to do what they do best: make furniture, so they often found themselves with an inventory of ready-made furniture and in search of buyers.

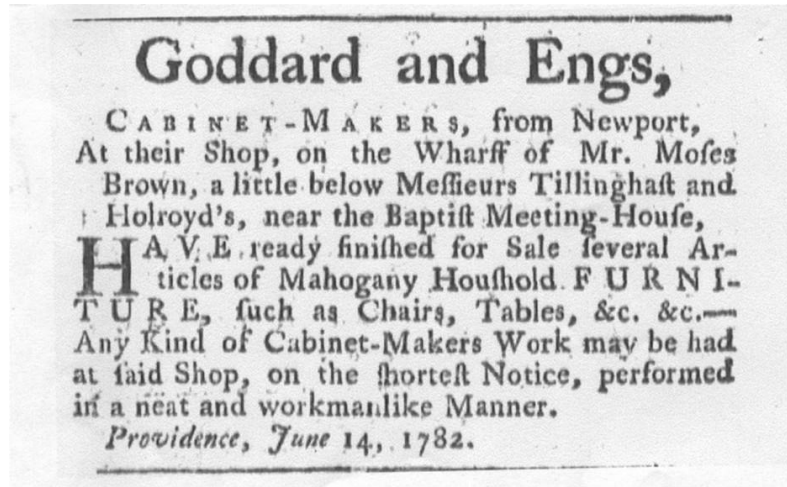
Newport was also home to a merchant class who specialized in finding buyers for merchandise, and they too were scrambling in the post-war era. With cabinetmakers in need of customers and merchants in need of both customers and merchandise, it was inevitable that they would work together.

This arrangement was not entirely new in Newport. Long before the war Newport merchants sometimes engaged cabinetmakers to build pieces for them to sell. While the leading cabinetmakers were usually busy filling their customers' orders, for cabinetmakers with a small customer base this wholesale trade could be an important part of their business. Some merchants went so far as to hire cabinetmakers full-time in merchant-owned shops to keep them supplied with goods. This arrangement was ideal for cabinetmakers with neither a customer base nor an adequate shop.

After the war, the shift towards ready-made furniture saw the rise of ware-rooms, which were showrooms of available pieces, and manufactories, where craftsmen worked in the employment

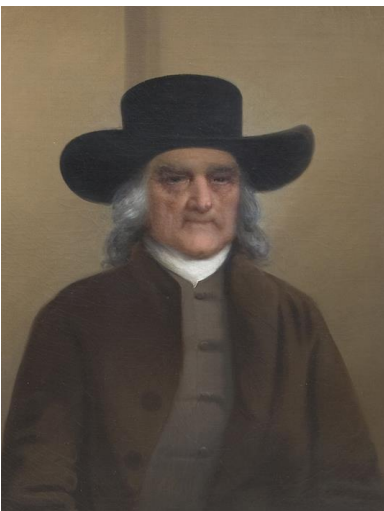
of others in a system of pre-industrial hand production.

In the post-war years there is extensive documentation of the younger Goddard sons, Townsend, Stephen, and Thomas, working on their own and together making pieces in quantity for merchant Christopher Champlin to resell. Another merchant family in Newport, the Eng's, advertised in the *Providence Gazette* in 1782 a partnership with the Goddards in selling furniture in Providence at the wharf of Moses Brown (below).



Thus Moses Brown's wharf on the waterfront became the beachhead for Goddard Newport furniture in Providence. Moses Brown was one of the four Brown brothers who through trade and business of all sorts became enormously successful in Rhode Island. Most, if not all of the Brown brothers, had purchased furniture from John Goddard and the Townsends in the halcyon days before the war, so Moses was well acquainted with their reputation for fine work. One of

Moses Brown's many business ventures was a partnership with Samuel Slater in the first mechanized woolen mill in the United States. Slater Mill, as it was known, is today considered to be the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution in America.



Moses Brown, 1738-1836. Portrait by John Wesley Jarvis, 1924; Brown University Portrait Collection.

In 1789, Moses Brown (left) and his son-in-law, William Almy, had acquired a mill in Pawtucket with the intention of weaving fabric. Weaving was by then mechanized, but the spinning of fibers into yarn or thread was still done by hand with a spinning wheel. In England, Richard Arkwright had patented a machine called a spinning frame or water frame to produce continuous threads. Brown and Almy had purchased a spinning frame based on the Arkwright design but found it too unreliable and problematic to use in production.¹

¹ Everett et al. (Slater Study Group), *"Samuel Slater - Hero or Traitor?"* Milford, Derbyshire: Maypole Promotions, 2006

It was at this time that Samuel Slater offered his expertise to Brown. Samuel Slater was an English immigrant who came to America with a depth of knowledge of the most modern English textile machinery, and while British law prohibited the export of machinery, Slater's knowledge of it was for sale.

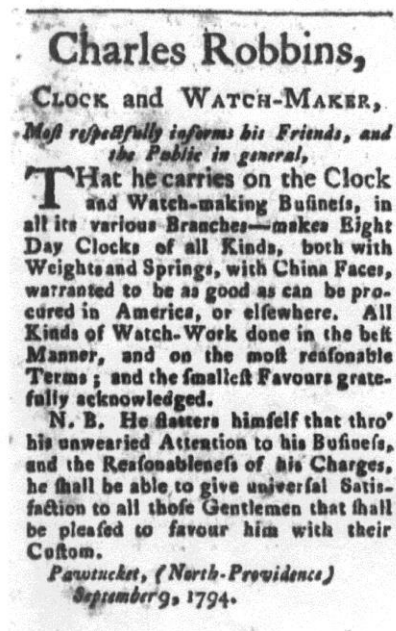


Samuel Slater, 1768-1835. From Bagnall, *The Textile Industries of the United States*, 1893.

Slater (left) had only a basic education, but he had worked in a cotton mill since the age of 10. When his father died when Slater was 14 years old, he was indentured to mill owner Jedediah Strutt, whose mill used the much-coveted Arkwright spinning frame in its production. Slater learned well both the machinery and the operation of the mill by the time his indenture was finished in 1789 at age 21. Familiar with intricacies of state-of-the-art British textile machinery, Slater set out for the United States ready to make the most of his valuable knowledge.²

Shortly after arriving in the United States, Slater learned of the difficulties that Brown and Almy were having with their knock-off spinning frame and he offered his services. Slater found Brown's machinery completely unusable and by 1790 had an agreement with the mill owners to replace it with

replicas of the Arkwright machinery in exchange for half-ownership in the equipment and profits if he was successful. By the end of the year they were in small-scale operation, employing less than a dozen workers. Slater was plagued by shortages of tools and skilled mechanics, but within three years he had reengineered the entire factory; the mill was in full production, and Slater was a partner.³



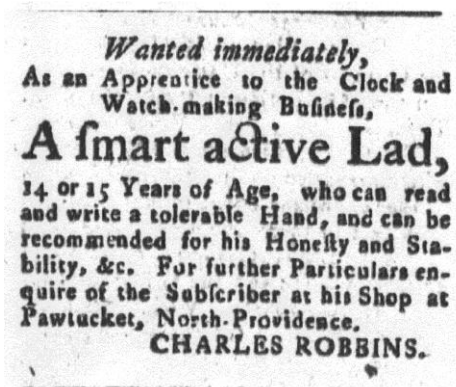
The machinery in use in the mill was at the cutting edge of technology at that time, and well beyond the expertise of most tradesmen with the exception of one: the clockmaker. Clockmakers made the movements of clocks and watches (the wooden cases were made by cabinetmakers) so they were one of the few trades with knowledge and expertise in the manufacturing, operation, and repair of intricate, small-scale metal mechanisms.

Pawtucket clockmaker Charles Robbins was one such tradesman. Robbins had an ongoing business and advertised in Providence's *United States Chronicle* in 1794 offering eight-day clocks with either weight or spring-driven movements (left), and was busy enough to advertise for "A smart active Lad" as an apprentice in May of 1795 (below). His mechanical ability led him to be employed by Slater as a mechanic where he gained a considerable reputation. In

² Ibid

³ White, G. S., *Memoir of Samuel Slater*, Philadelphia, 1836; reprinted Augustus M. Kelly, 1967 in Everett et al. (Slater Study Group)

1804 he was invited to New Ipswich, New Hampshire, to build cotton textile machinery and he eventually managed and became a partner with Charles Barrett Jr. in the New Ipswich Cotton Factory, paralleling closely Slater's rise to prominence⁴.



Wanted immediately,
As an Apprentice to the Clock and
Watch-making Business,
A smart active Lad,
14 or 15 Years of Age, who can read
and write a tolerable Hand, and can be
recommended for his Honesty and Sta-
bility, &c. For further Particulars en-
quire of the Subscriber at his Shop at
Pawtucket, North-Providence.
CHARLES ROBBINS.

Interestingly, another clockmaker had played a vital role in the early development of the Arkwright spinning frame in England decades before. Richard Arkwright had been a wig merchant and aspiring entrepreneur who hired a clockmaker named John Kay to make brass wheels for a perpetual-motion machine he was working on.⁵ A few months later, Arkwright engaged Kay to build and perfect a spinning frame. The spinning frame was eventually successful and Arkwright patented it in 1769, much to Kay's surprise. Patent suits raged for years between Arkwright, Kay, and Kay's former neighbor, an inventor who had tried

unsuccessfully to create a spinning frame with Kay years before. The courts eventually ruled against Arkwright but it was a hollow victory for Kay and his neighbor since they were awarded no compensation.⁶

It is not known if the Stephen Goddard case and Charles Robbins movement were commissioned by Slater or if the case was complete and available for sale and Slater had Robbins fit it with a movement. We can see clearly, however, that the connection between the Goddards and Brown, Brown and Slater, and Slater and Robbins brought the case and movement together and gave us not only an exemplary tall-case clock, but an insightful narrative and insider's view of early industry as well.

The mahogany case, in the block-and-shell style made famous by the Newport cabinetmakers in the years before the war, was long out of style when it was made by young Stephen Goddard. The prevailing taste had shifted to the leaner Federal style, with carefully selected wood grain and inlay for ornament instead of carved details. Nonetheless, Stephen Goddard continued to make furniture as he had been taught by his father, in the style which had served the family well and established their sizable reputation decades before.

Ironically, the clock stands as a monument marking a distinct turning point between one era and one that was wholly different. It marks the end of Newport as a major 18th-century colonial city of the and the rise of Providence as a 19th-century industrial center; the end of the golden era of Newport furniture craftsmanship and the beginning of industrial production; the decline of one family that made its name as artisans and the emergence of another that made its fortune on the factory system; the end of one way of life and the beginning of another.

⁴ Bagnall, William R., *The Textile Industries of the United States*, Riverside Press, 1893, pp. 368,369

⁵ Aikin, J.; Johnston, W., *General Biography*, Robinson, 1799, p. 391.

⁶ McNeil, Ian, *An Encyclopedia of the History of Technology*. London: Routledge, 1990, pp. 827–30.