

Identifying Characteristics of Furniture from the Shop of Job Townsend Sr.

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Some unusual drawer markings in two Newport case pieces in the collection of Newport Restoration Foundation's Whitehorne House have drawn a great deal of interest to these seemingly unrelated pieces.

The first of these is a five-drawer chest in maple and birch (fig. 1). The piece has some early features including ball feet, inset drawers, and single-arch moldings surrounding the drawer openings. The second is a slipper-foot dressing table in mahogany with gracefully-shaped cabriole legs and a central Newport curved-ray shell on the front apron.



Figure 1. Newport five-drawer chest (left) and slipper-foot dressing table (right) in the collection of the Newport Restoration Foundation's Whitehorne house.

These two pieces, which at first glance have appear unrelated, share a number of strikingly similar features in their drawer construction. Both have the same through-bottom style of drawer construction typical of Newport furniture and both have a previously unnoticed drawer component marking system. They also have the same treatment of the top edge of the drawer sides: square with a chamfered edge rather than the more common rounded edge. Both have large dovetails of similar character, unlike the fine and closely spaced dovetails typical of other Newport pieces, and the side dovetails extend beyond the drawer backs. Most notably, both have the same chalk marks on the back of the drawer backs: the larger drawers have crescent-shaped marks and the smaller drawers have a horizontal chalk line (fig. 2). Were these two pieces not in close proximity in the same collection, their similar markings may never have been noticed. These same marks are also present in a related five-drawer chest and a Newport mahogany desk in private collections.



Figure 2. Chalk marks on the backs of the drawers of the five-drawer chest (left) and dressing table (right). The five drawers of the chest each have the cursive S and it is inverted on the bottom drawer. The top drawer of the dressing table has the same cursive S and chalk lines across the backs of the two smaller drawers. Below: closer view of the chalk S on the top right drawer of the chest.



These chalk marks have been called crescents, half-moons, and Ds, but they are in actuality cursive “S”s; some of the Ss are inverted and some have a partial loop at the top. Since they are the same on all the chest drawers, they don’t indicate a drawer position, and are therefore a maker’s mark. They are also important for what they are not: the familiar large graphite script letters used in the shops of Christopher and John Townsend, or the graphite numbers often seen in products of the John Goddard family shop. These marks are those of a different shop and as apparent by the level

of sophistication of the design and workmanship, another prominent Newport shop. After identifying these features, the hope was to associate them with other pieces authenticated or attributed to a known maker.

The dressing table is one of a group of three similar slipper-foot dressing tables which includes the Cole dressing table at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Ward dressing table at Chipstone (fig. 3). The Ward table is attributed to the workshop of Job Townsend Sr. (1699-1765) by way of an accompanying bill of sale for that and other pieces sold to Samuel Ward by Job Townsend Sr. in 1746. The three tables share not only nearly identical design and construction, but also many smaller details, including:

- Major dimensions identical to within 1/2 inch
- Front and side apron profiles and details
- Curved-ray shells within an arc of the same size, number of lobes, layout, square lower ray, and inner arch shape
- Knee blocks with angled back surfaces



Figure 3. Cole dressing table in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (left) and the Ward dressing table in the Chipstone Collection (right) associated with Job Townsend Sr. by a 1746 bill of sale. Below: the angled knee block of the NRF dressing table, a common feature in all three pieces.



The similarity of most of these details cannot be attributed to anything but the use of the same patterns, which are specific to a shop. The layouts of the shells are consistent enough to have been delineated on the pattern, with the smallest details left to the discretion of the carver (the Ward piece has a simple palmette in the center). The knee blocks with angled back surfaces are distinctive features not seen in the work of either the Christopher or John Townsend shops or the John Goddard family shop. Together, these details indicate that all three pieces are products of the same shop.

The one inconsistency in the group is the different height of the drawers in the 1746 Ward dressing table compared to the NRF and Cole examples. On closer examination it is seen that the pattern for the front apron is the same on all three, but the maker put the horizontal drawer divider above the apron panel on the Ward table, while it is positioned behind the apron in the NRF and Cole pieces (fig 4.). The left and right drawer heights reflect this, being 3 ½ inches tall in the NRF and Cole dressing tables, but 4 inches tall in the Ward piece.

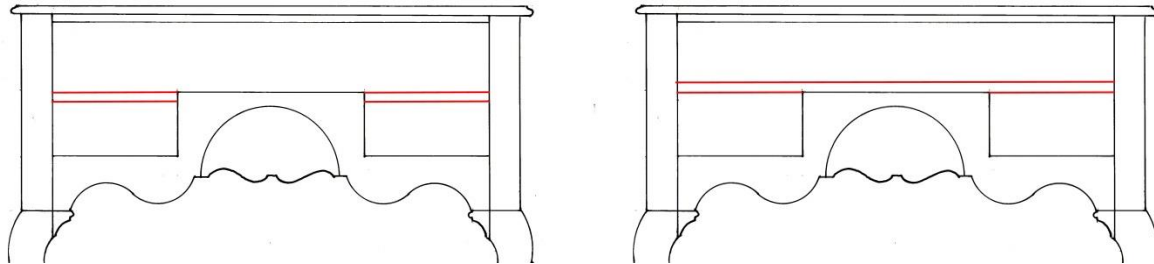


Figure 4. Layout of case front and drawer openings with the drawer divider behind the apron board as on the NRF and Cole dressing tables (left) and with the divider above the apron board as on the Ward dressing table (right). As a result, the NRF and Cole pieces have a tall upper drawer over short (3 ½") lower drawers, while the Ward piece has a shorter upper drawer over taller (4") lower drawers.

Through these details, the NRF dressing table, with its chalk S maker's marks, may be associated with the workshop of Job Townsend Sr. by way of the Ward dressing table and its bill of sale.

The chest of drawers and the dressing table also have a drawer marking system that can be associated with the shop of Job Townsend Sr. In addition to the chalk maker's marks, both pieces have a previously unseen set of marks used by the maker to identify, orient, and assemble the drawer parts. These marks are simple chisel marks punched into the tops of the drawer sides and backs. Each full-width drawer has a single ¼ inch wide mark at the inner back of each drawer side and on the inner top of the drawer back (fig. 5). These marks are not obvious and were apparently only for the maker's reference in joining the drawer, an internal shop practice. The wide drawers have a single punched chisel mark, but side-by-side drawers use one mark for the left drawer parts and two marks for the right drawer parts. Both the NRF chest of drawers and the dressing table have this marking system and it can also be seen throughout the interior drawers of the labeled Job Townsend desk-bookcase in the collection of the Rhode Island School of Design Museum (fig. 6). In that desk-bookcase, drawers that have the possibility of being interchanged are marked in the same manner, with one mark for left drawer parts and two marks for right drawer parts. Where there are more interchangeable drawers, the sequence continues. The desk uses center-punch marks and scratched lines at the maker's discretion, but follows the same internal shop practice of this simplified marking convention.

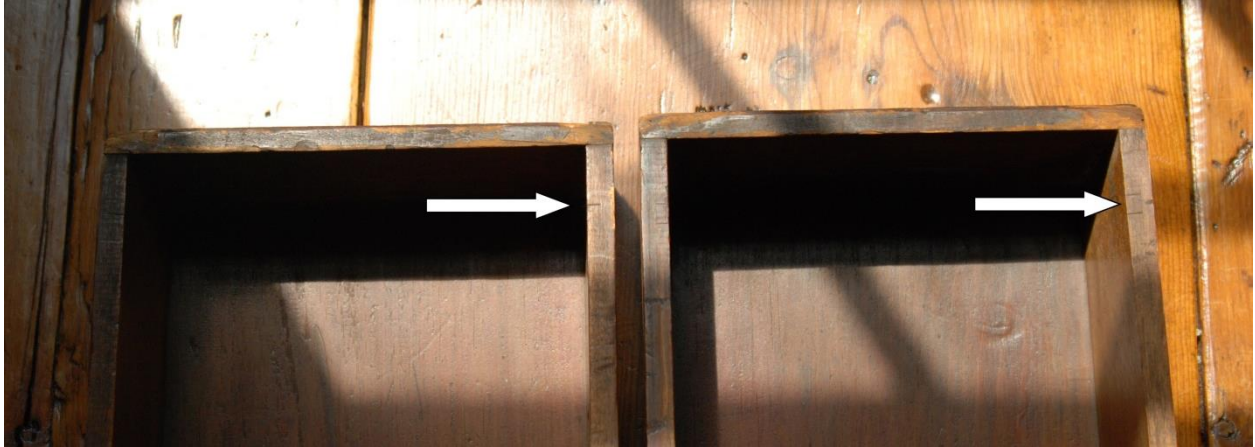


Figure 5. Chisel-punched marking system used by the maker S to differentiate left from right drawers with one or two chisel marks. This system is used on the NRF dressing table (above), the upper left and right drawers of the chest shown in Figure 1, and the same convention is used throughout the desk bearing the label of Job Townsend at the Rhode Island School of Design. Below: single chisel marks in the inner left rear corner of a chest drawer.



It is also significant that this system is distinctly different from the component marking systems known to have been used by other Newport shops, again indicating a shop other than the Christopher or John Townsend shops or the Goddard shop. Their shop practice was to letter or number the entire set of drawers in sequence from upper left to lower right. Curiously, it seems that Job Sr.'s shop made no effort to mark the position of the drawers for the customer while his brother Christopher and nephew John made a deliberate effort to do so.

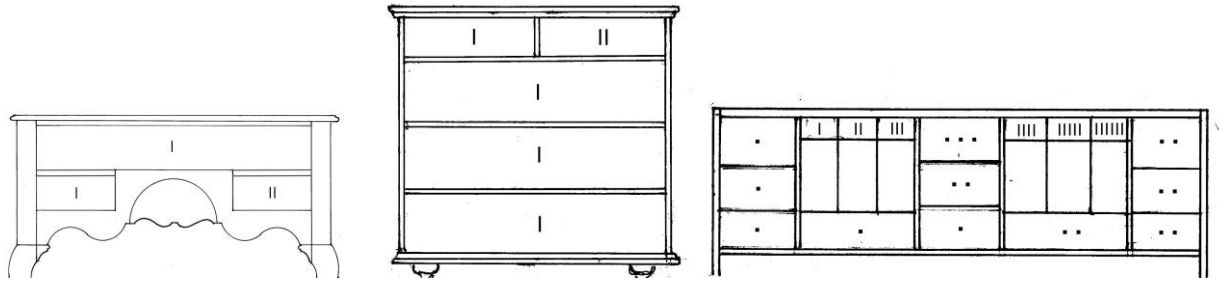


Figure 6. Drawer marking convention common to NRF dressing table, chest of drawers, and labeled Job Townsend desk interior: drawer components (front, sides, and back) are marked with chisel cuts, center-punch marks, or scratches to differentiate only the drawers that have the possibility of being interchangeable, with one mark used for left-side drawers and two marks used for right-side drawers. Where there are more interchangeable drawers, the numbering sequence continues. No more prominent markings were provided to indicate the drawer position to the customer. This convention contrasts with other shop methods of lettering or numbering the entire set of drawers in sequence from upper left to lower right.

There are two documented products of the Job Townsend Sr. shop: the Ward dressing table and the RISD desk-bookcase, and both the NRF dressing table and chest of drawers may be associated with them by several distinctive features not used by other makers. By the identification of these shop practices and characteristics, more attributions to the Job Townsend Sr. shop are possible, including the previously mentioned second chest of drawers and desk in private collections with the same S marks.

So if the chalk S marks indicate the work of the Job Townsend Sr. shop, what does the S stand for? The most obvious answer is the maker's initial, but Job's apprentices included his sons Job Townsend Jr., Edmund Townsend, and Thomas Townsend, as well as future son-in-law John Goddard, none of whose names begin with S. The only other person documented to have worked in Job's shop was Samuel Allin, the apprentice who ran away at age 19. At that age he was well along in his apprenticeship in the "Shop Joyners Trade" and would have been thoroughly experienced in dovetailing drawers. Townsend famously advertised for his return in the *Boston Gazette* in July 1737, offering "five Pounds New England Currency" plus expenses for his return. Samuel would have been especially valuable to Job, since Job's sons were too young to be apprentices at that time, the oldest being only 10 years old. There is no evidence that the young apprentice ever returned to Newport to finish his apprenticeship or work on his own, nor is he known to have worked elsewhere. If this is the case, it could establish a date of 1737 or earlier for the NRF pieces, that being a new early date for the use of the Newport shell and a late date for the styling of the chest of drawers. We'll never know for certain if the S mark and the drawer construction was the work of young Samuel Allin, but there is no doubt he was in the right shop, at the right time, and with the right initial.