

REPORT
July 15, 2022

In June, 2022, Graham Arader asked me for my written opinion on the identity and authenticity of a Pennsylvania walnut chest-on-frame, furniture inventory number 318. This report summarizes my observations and opinions.

Chest-on-frame

Philadelphia area or western New Jersey, 1750-1785

Walnut; white cedar drawer bottoms, tulip poplar drawer sides, hard pine backs of small drawers and top large drawer and left side of second large drawer from the bottom

65-1/8 x 41-3/4 x 23-3/4

The chest-on-frame was a modest form of the far more common and substantial high chest of drawers. The primary difference lay in the simpler frame of the former. It lacked drawers and consequently height, inasmuch as the legs were about the same as those in high chests. The form was described in the 1772 *Price of Cabinet and Chair Work* as a “Ditto [i.e., Low chest of drawers with three long and five small drawers], on frame, 18 inches high, without a drawer” (p. 6). In acknowledgment of its simpler form, the price book gave prices only for walnut examples, omitting the more expensive mahogany version. The maker of this particular chest-on-frame substituted a single full-width drawer for two side-by-side drawers in the second tier, a relatively common alternative.

This walnut chest-on-frame closely resembles a striped maple example with a history of ownership in Burlington County, New Jersey, one of the few known with any kind of history (see Thomas Smith Hopkins and Walter Scott Cox, *Colonial Furniture of West New Jersey* [1936], pp. 8-90. Another walnut example bears an illegible chalk inscription (*Biggs Collection* [2002], vol. 1, no. 77) but is otherwise without provenance. A nearly identical scalloped skirt design occurs on a high chest of drawers owned in Salem, New Jersey, about 40 miles down the Delaware River from Philadelphia (William MacPherson Hornor, Jr., *Blue Book, Philadelphia Furniture: William Penn to George Washington* [1935], pl. 55). This cluster of similar chests-on-frame separates them from chests-on-frame with provenances from other areas, notably West Chester, Pennsylvania. The scalloped front skirts differ as do secondary woods, especially use of white cedar drawer bottoms, which is a common practice in Philadelphia urban furniture.

As for when this chest-on-frame was made, its design features endured for decades. Cabriole legs ending in trifold feet, called “plain” in the period, became fashionable in the 1730s and remained viable through 1800 at least. The rising center of the front skirt design evokes early furniture, but it too remained in use for many decades. Brasses help date furniture, but they have been replaced on this chest, and so are not useful indicators. This chest-on-frame has half dustboards separating the drawers; the drawers have had runners repaired and replaced.