

REPORT  
April 25, 2022

In February 2022, Graham Arader asked me for my written opinion on the identity and authenticity of a pair of walnut side chairs, possibly from New Jersey, furniture inventory number 303. This report summarizes my observations and opinions.

**Pair of side chairs**

Delaware Valley, possibly New Jersey, 1755-90

Walnut; tulip poplar (one slip seat)

39-7/8 x 22-1/4 x 20-3/4

“I” and “II” are chiseled into a side rail and the front seat rabbet, respectively, on one chair. “II” is chiseled into the front rabbet and “III” into the inside of the rear rail on the other chair. One slip seat is marked “VI”; the other is a replacement.

This pair of chairs falls firmly into seating made in the greater Philadelphia region, but equally, its design and construction indicate its likely origin outside of the urban Philadelphia furniture-making community. Among regional characteristics, it has cabriole legs with “trifid” feet. They have a single raised panel leading up from a large center toe; urban Philadelphia chairs typically have three panels or panel-like devices that acknowledge all three toes. The outer toes of the feet on the pair of chairs are unusually thin and pointed, effecting a distinctive expression. The rear legs are chamfered to an octagonal shape, as customary, and the side rails tenon through the rear stiles. Similarly, the side and front rails show typical undercutting. The rails are not molded on the top edges, in contrast to most but not all urban chairs. The splat is of a simple “eared” variety that was used broadly throughout the greater region and for decades.

The serpentine crest rail, with its unique floral motif nested in the center, is a most idiosyncratic feature. Instead of the usual shell variant, this crest motif shows a spray of three stylized leaves with smaller lobes or leaflets, all raised on a single pellet. The motif sits above the scratch bead that outlines the top of the crest (and the outer edges of the stiles); a wavy border or thin mantle encloses the top. This charming composition has no known counterparts.

The provenance of this pair of chairs includes ownership by St. Michael’s Episcopal Church in Trenton, New Jersey, where they were likely given by a member of the congregation. Four other chairs from the original set of six are in the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. They

were a 1940 bequest of R[ichard]. Wistar Harvey (1868-1939) of Philadelphia. He was a sole surviving child of Alexander Elmslie Harvey (1824-1910) and Rachel Lewis Wistar (1828-1893), both of Philadelphia. Those four chairs have brass plaques on them that record the name Harris of Florence, New Jersey. Research to date has not revealed the significance of the plaques, but they point to a possible area of origin for the chair set.

Both chairs have repairs at the back of their respective shoes where the base of the splat is anchored. Crest rail breaks on each chair raise the possibility that the splats of each might have been reinstalled in the respective chairs. Additionally, they have replaced corner blocks. Curiously, the profile of the tops of the seat rails is more rounded on one chair than the other. Normally, such profiles would be very similar, even though each was shaped by hand.