

REPORT
May 3, 2022

In February 2022, Graham Arader asked me for my written opinion on the identity and authenticity of a set of four walnut side chairs, probably from York, Pennsylvania, furniture inventory number 304. This report summarizes my observations and opinions.

Set of four side chairs

Eastern Pennsylvania, probably York, 1755-1780

Walnut; hard pine slip seats

39-3/8 x 22 x 20

Roman numerals “II,” “III,” “III,” and “VI” are chiseled into the inside center of the front seat rabbet of individual chairs. Three of the four chairs have provenance inscriptions on the insides of the rear seat rails, discussed below.

The crest rail, splat, and front leg designs of these chairs were widely used in the Philadelphia region (Eastern Pennsylvania, Southern New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland) over several decades. The “eared” crest rail is the latest feature of the three, introduced about 1750. The splat design and cabriole legs ending in trifold feet were introduced in the 1730s, but remained in use until late in the century. Of note, the 1766 furniture drawings of Philadelphia furniture maker Samuel Mickle include one of a generally similar side chair that has the same double-ogee undercutting in the front rail as well as undercut side rails (illustrated in John T. Kirk, *American Chairs: Queen Anne and Chippendale* [1972], p. 6).

Refining time and geographical origin for this set of chairs relies on interpreting several small details. For example, the “stump” rear legs are rounded on the front and rear faces and are straight or in plane on the sides. This particular shaping appears regularly on chairs with pierced splats and claw-and-ball feet, and it does not appear often, if at all, on chairs with rounded shoulders and otherwise datable before about 1750. The chairs are solidly made. The seat rails are relatively deep, tenoned through the rear stiles (as in most Philadelphia regional seating), all of the mortise-and-tenon joints are double-pegged, and the knee brackets are secured with three nails (rather than two or one or none). Urban chairmakers tended to reduce the number of visible pins and the size of seat rails over time, but very few omitted corner blocks, as here. Thus, the combination of no corner blocks and heavy construction may signal non-Philadelphia

construction. These chairs also lack a scratch-bead along the outside edges of the stiles and crest rail, which was a frequent decorative detail in Philadelphia work.

This set of four relatively simple side chairs has an intriguing history of ownership and use that informs their origin. Three of the four side chairs bear lengthy and slightly different inscriptions on the insides of seat rails recording their use by George Washington. The unscribed fourth chair is part of the set. Chair numbers chiseled into the front seat rabbets (the ledge cut to support slip seats) include one marked “VI,” indicating an original set of six. Thus, the Mrs. Wilson noted in the inscriptions likely inherited three, or half of the original set, to which a fourth member of the set was later rejoined. Mrs. Wilson, whose identity remains unknown, was said to be the fourth owner, probably the fourth generation.

The inscriptions were written in the 20th century, based on mention that the set was “around 200 years in the family.” They claim that the chairs were used by Washington “in one of his rooms which he occupied at Gen [illegible] (who was one of his staff) when the army was at York, . . .” The reference likely points to Gen. Horatio Gates (1727-1806), who served in the Continental Army. He was involved in the “Conway Cabal,” a group of senior Continental officers critical of Washington in late 1777, at the same time the Continental Congress was forced to relocate to York, Pennsylvania, to escape the British, who occupied Philadelphia. A cabal meeting is said to have occurred in the 1751 Joseph Chambers house that was restored in 1961 to 1963 and renamed the Gen. Gates House.

Washington was never in York during the Revolutionary War, although he did visit on five occasions before and after. Although this historical detail undermines the inscriptions, they offer credible evidence that the chairs were owned in York for a long time. Given interpretation of the physical evidence of the chairs, it is very likely that they were made in York. More recently, the chairs were owned by Samuel Hallock du Pont (1901-1974) and William K. du Pont (1938-2020).