Treasures of the Chesapeake

BY CHRISTINE MINTER-DOWD

Treasures of the Chesapeake is the theme of the 2007 Washington Antiques Show's loan exhibition, which presents thirty-three treasures made and used in the Chesapeake Bay region. Encompassing territory in three states, the region stretches 180 miles from Baltimore, Maryland, in the north to Hampton Roads, Virginia, in the south. The objects are on loan from museums and private collections well known for exhibiting, preserving, and researching the decorative arts of the Chesapeake, and include the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum in Washington, D.C., the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, Maryland, the Lyceum in Alexandria, Virginia, and the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Fig. 1: Card table, Baltimore, MD., circa 1820–1830. Mahogany and yellow poplar. Collection of the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, Washington, D.C. Friends of the Museum Purchase. 78.36.

The household inventory taken when Charles Ridgely, a former Governor of Maryland, died in 1829, lists many pieces of then fashionable painted or fancy furniture. Among items listed in the front parlor of his Gay Street home in Baltimore were "2 green & gold card tables," of which this is one. The design on this table's front skirt is derived from classical motifs and is painted in yellow with Pompeian-red highlights. This same design appears on two other documented Baltimore painted pieces of the same period. The table descended in the family until it was acquired by the DAR Museum.

Baltimore is represented by painted furniture (Fig. 1), domestic silver and a superlative album quilt (Fig. 2). America's boomtown of the early nineteenth century, Baltimore boasted the second largest port in the country, through which an enormous variety of merchandise was imported and exported. With a population of over 26,000 in 1800, Baltimore was the region's largest city; three times the size of Norfolk and ten times that of Annapolis. Wealth from the region's lucrative grain-based trade encouraged in its citizens a taste for precisely executed neo-classical furnishings; its artisans responded with prolific offerings.

Fig. 2: Album quilt, Baltimore, MD., circa 1850. Appliquéd, embroidered, pieced, stuffed, signed and quilted cotton. Collection of the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, Washington, D.C. 87.68.

In addition to goods, innovative ideas and techniques flowed into Baltimore, including new methods for designing, cutting, and appliquéing colorful cloth on plain muslin backings. This unique form of bed covering is known today as the Baltimore album quilt. Album quilts were not made from hoarded scraps; they are the ancestors of today's textile collages. They were made by city dwelling, middle-class women using colorful, carefully selected and cut fabrics. This quilt commemorates Andrew Jackson's victory at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. Using ink and cross-stitch, an inscription in the center block reads "Andrew Jackson's heart, Victory at New Orleans January 8, 1815, The blessing of government, like the dews of heaven, should be equally dispersed on the rich and poor A. J. W. Jackson." All of the individuals named on the quilt were members of the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Baltimore.

Alexandria, Virginia and Georgetown, D.C.

In 1810, the population of Alexandria, Virginia, was 7,227. The town had "a commodious harbour, sufficiently deep for the largest ships, and is a place of extensive trade, especially in the article of flour." Nearby Georgetown counted 4,948 people, "five houses of public worship, [and] a college established in 1799 which has two spacious edifices with a library of 7,000 volumes and 150 students." Ten years later, the census documented that Alexandria's population was now 8,218, and Georgetown's, which gained its own university in 1815, was now 7,360. Moreover, within the ten square mile designation of the District of Columbia, of which Alexandria (until 1846), Georgetown, and Washington, D.C., were a part, there was a total population of 33,000 citizens, of which 2,184 were engaged in manufacture and 512 in commerce. Clearly the District was a center for goods, as illustrated here by an 1818 armchair (Fig. 3) made by William King of Georgetown for the Monroe White House. The grand silver coffee pot in figure 4 was made after 1800 by Adam Lynn who worked across the Potomac River in Alexandria.

Fig. 3: Armchair by William King (1745–1854), Georgetown, D.C., 1818. Mahogany. Collection of the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, Washington, D.C. Friends of the Museum Purchase. Acc. 61.133.1.

William King was born in Ireland and emigrated to America with his parents shortly before the Revolution. According to family records, he served an apprenticeship to cabinetmaker John Shaw of Annapolis, completing his training in 1792. He continued working with Shaw for several years but by 1795 had moved to Georgetown, D.C., where he set up his own shop and remained in business until his death in 1854.

One of a pair of armchairs in the DAR Museum collection, this was part of the set of twenty-four chairs and four sofas ordered in 1817 by President Monroe for the East Room of the White House. As the room was little used throughout the Monroe administration, this set remained uncovered until 1829, when Andrew Jackson refurnished the room, sending the entire set to Louis Veron and Company of Philadelphia for "cotton covers." Most of the set seems to have left the White House in 1873 during an East Room renovation. That King was awarded the commission to make a large suite of furniture for the White House indicates the respect given to him by the community. Many prominent Georgetown citizens purchased furniture from King's shop; several documented pieces are in private collections and many attributed pieces are still owned by family members. In addition to his furniture-making business, King operated a brisk trade in undertaking, making more than 7,100 coffins during his forty-nine years in business.

Fig. 4: Coffeepot, by Adam Lynn, Alexandria, VA., circa 1796. Silver. H. 16 in. Collection of the Lyceum. Purchased with funds from the Charles Cecil Williams Silver Fund and the Lyceum Company.

Adam Lynn, son of Adam and Catherine Lynn, was born in Alexandria. His father was a colonel in the Revolutionary army and a member of the Society of the Cincinnati. Lynn was one of several silversmiths listed in Alexandria in the 1791 census. From 1795 to 1796 he was a partner in the firm Coryton and Lynn; shortly thereafter he opened his own gold and silversmith and engraver's shop on King Street. Several years later, he was advertising hardware and jewelry. In 1798, Lynn speculated in land, and by 1822 all his property was sold to cover his debts. He did not advertise as a silversmith again. Lynn remained active in the community despite these financial difficulties, serving on the vestry of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Alexandria, as a justice of the peace, and in the county militia.

Much of Lynn's work is sophisticated in design and execution. He was an exceptional engraver; many of his pieces are richly decorated with lively and innovative designs. This coffeepot is ornamented with beading and engraving on the base, body, spout, and lid. It is engraved with a monogrammed "M" and is marked "A. Lynn" twice on the underside of the base in opposing corners.

Norfolk, Virginia

Founded in the late seventeenth century, Norfolk, Virginia, was the first port that ships encountered as they entered the Chesapeake Bay from the Atlantic, and the last upon leaving the Bay for the open sea. Scholars have identified several groups of local cabinet work that date to the closing years of that century. Although the city was burned to the ground during the Revolutionary War, it rebounded. By 1800, in combination with Portsmouth on the opposite bank of the Elizabeth River, its population was nearly 10,000. Norfolk has and continues to be Virginia's largest city and one of its principal centers of furniture production. A secretary and bookcase made in Norfolk circa 1810 illustrates the exceptional neoclassical work being done in the city at the time (Fig.5). The sugar bowl and creamer were made by Matthew Cluff, who prospered in Norfolk before moving to Elizabeth Town, North Carolina, in 1815 (Fig. 6).

Fig. 5: Secretary and bookcase, Norfolk, VA., attributed to James Woodward (working 1792–1839), circa 1810. Mahogany, mahogany veneer with light and dark wood inlays, yellow pine, and poplar. Private collection; photography courtesy of Sumpter Priddy Antiques, Alexandria, VA.

This desk and bookcase owned by the Tebault, Cornick, and Ferebee families of Broad Bay Plantation in Princess Anne County, Virginia, illustrates the high quality of case pieces produced in downtown Norfolk during the neoclassical era. The distinctive pediment, glazed doors, and complex interior arrangement of pigeonholes and drawers characterize one of the largest and finest groups of Norfolk neoclassical case pieces. These objects are believed to come from the shop of cabinetmaker James Woodward, owner of the city's largest furniture-making and warehousing operation during the post-Revolutionary period.[I]

Fig. 6: Sugar bowl and creamer, by Matthew Cluff (w. 1802–1816), Norfolk, VA., date unknown. Silver. Collection of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Old Salem Museums and Gardens, Winston-Salem, N.C. Acc. 2437.1,2.

Matthew Cluff first appears in Norfolk registers in 1803 as a member of the firm of Ott & Cluff, jewelers and engravers. When the partnership dissolved in 1806 Cluff advertised as a goldsmith and jeweler with an address one block from his former partner. Cluff's merchandise slowly changed to shoes, clothing, military and fancy goods, and later still, dry goods and bonnets, until ultimately there is no mention of jewelry whatsoever. By 1816 he had moved to Elizabeth City, North Carolina, where he operated a store for another thirty years.

The eagle finial atop the lid of this sugar bowl was characteristic of the Empire style of the early nineteenth century. The different design of the gadrooned sides—the creamer's are swirled, the sugar's are straight—along with the variation in the bases, suggest that these pieces were perhaps purchased from stock on hand rather than made to order. The creamer has the inscription "Norfolk," while the sugar bowl does not.

Eastern Shore

The Eastern Shore includes numerous creeks, rivers, coves, and inlets along the coasts of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. Agricultural activities dominate this region where towns are small and widely spaced. The Shore has also supported commerce in the shipbuilding and maritime industries, as demonstrated by such examples as a ship's portrait (Fig. 7), a ship's wheel (Fig. 8), and a rigged model of a bugeye (Fig. 9), the easy-to-sail workhorse peculiar to the Chesapeake Bay.

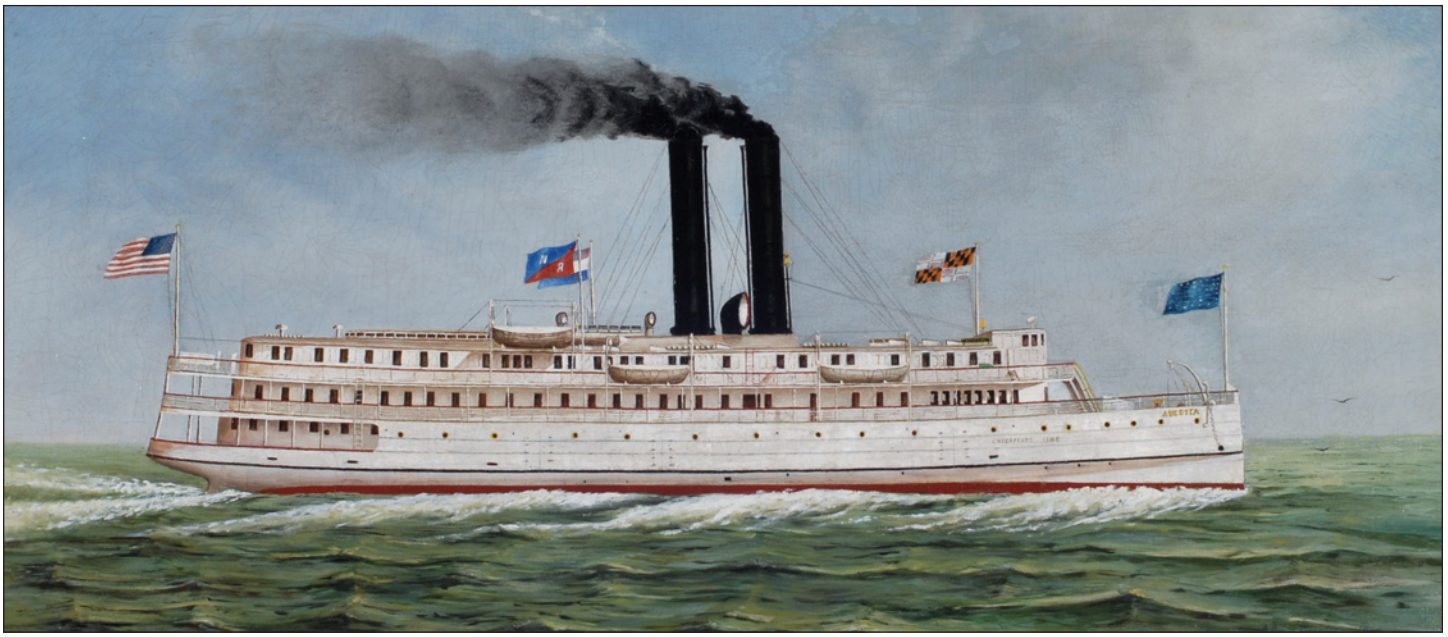

Fig. 7: Portrait of steamboat *Augusta*, by Alice Wilson Beasley (n.d.), possibly Baltimore, MD., circa 1900. Oil on canvas, 18½ x 40 inches. Collection of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. 1967.79.1.

During the 1870s and 1880s, The Chesapeake Steamship Line ran overnight express steamboats between Baltimore and Norfolk in competition with the Old Bay Line, until the beautiful new steamboat *Augusta*, added to the Chesapeake Line's fleet in 1900, began to tip the scales in its favor. Subsequently the Chesapeake Line was nicknamed the "New Bay Line." With two full decks of staterooms and brass beds in the best staterooms, she was the envy of the rival line. Five years later, the Old Bay Line added the larger *Virginia* to its fleet, and by 1916, *Augusta* was outclassed and sold off the Chesapeake. *Augusta* was also distinguished by being one of the only "two pipe" steamboats on the bay (one smokestack being much more typical).

We know very little about the artist Alice Wilson Beasley. Although clearly a skilled ship portraitist, she is not listed in any standard references on American or marine artists. It is presumed she lived in Baltimore and was active around 1900.

Fig. 9: Rigged model of Chesapeake Bay bugeye *Florence Northam*, by Captain R. D. Culler (1909-1978), Oxford, MD, 1935. Collection of Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. Gift of John N. Childs Jr. Acc. 2004.3.1.

Boatbuilder and yacht designer Captain "Pete" Culler built this model for the vessel's owner when the *Florence Northam* was converted to a yacht in 1935. Bugeyes were popular among Chesapeake Bay watermen because they were easy to sail, and a handful were, like the *Florence Northam*, converted to yachts in the early to mid-twentieth century.

Fig. 8: Ship's wheel from *F. C. Latrobe* or *Annapolis,* Baltimore, MD., 1879 or 1889. Wood, bronze. Collection of Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Olin. Acc. 198.19.1.

Although overshadowed by production on the Delaware River, Baltimore shipyards built a number of steamboats in the late nineteenth century, including the side-wheel icebreakers *F. C. Latrobe* (1879) and *Annapolis* (1889). These two vessels helped to keep the shipping lanes into Baltimore free of ice until 1959.

Christine Minter-Dowd *is a director emerita of the DAR Museum, an author for the Smithsonian Institution Press, and a former MESDA field researcher. She has been a volunteer to the Washington Antiques Show for nearly twenty years.*

1 Ronald Hurst and Jonathan Prown, Southern Furniture 1680–1830 (Colonial Williamsburg, 1997), 522.