

New Bedford Rising

Two Eighteenth-Century Furniture Finds

by jack o'brien

A recently discovered table and chest-on-chest add to a small, but growing group of furniture that we can tie to eighteenth century New Bedford, Massachusetts. Together with the other documented examples, they testify to a sophisticated regional furniture trade in the burgeoning port around the time of the Revolution.¹

The mahogany drop leaf table in figure 1 came to light in response to a notice seeking furniture related to New Bedford cabinetmaker Lemuel Tobey (1749–1820). Unlike most makers, Tobey's account books survive, and show him to have been a prolific cabinetmaker.² Despite the disruption of the war and his semi-retirement in the early 1790s, Tobey fashioned more than 500 pieces of furniture between 1773 and 1806, the years recorded in the account books. His output included 118 desks, 142 tables, sixty-three stands, forty-six chests of drawers, forty-nine bedsteads, and thirty-two chests. A substantial amount of his furniture—especially desks, tables, and stands—he exported as venture cargo.



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Fig. 1: Drop leaf table, attributed to Lemuel Tobey (1749–1820), Bedford Village/New Bedford, Massachusetts, 1775–1790. Inscribed “E. Tobey” on the underside of the top. The rounded corners of the leaves most likely date the table to the mid-1780s, around the time Lemuel's brother, Elisha, Jr., purchased a desk. Mahogany; birch, maple, eastern white pine. H. 27 $\frac{3}{8}$, W. 13 $\frac{1}{4}$ (38 $\frac{1}{2}$ open), D. 39 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. Courtesy of a private collection. Photograph by Russ Berman and Sue Owrutsky.

Fig. 2: Detail of figure 1 showing the inscription “E. Tobey.” Notice the distinctive diagonal cross brace and fine workmanship of the finger hinge and dovetails. The second set of screw holes in the frame correspond to matching holes in the top. Photograph by Russ Berman and Sue Owrutsky.

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Fig. 3: Chest-on-chest, Cornelius Allen (1767–1835), New Bedford, Massachusetts, 1787–1790. Maple. Signed “Cornelius Allen” and inscribed “New Bedford/Barnstable/Longplain” on a backboard. Barnstable was where the Allens grew up, and Ebenezer's shop was in Longplain, which lies a few miles north of New Bedford. Eastern white pine, maple. H. 85 1/2, W. 42 1/4, D. 20 7/8 in. Taylor Williams Antiques, Herbert, Michigan. Courtesy of Winterthur Museum. Photograph by Lazlo Bodo.



Until recently we could only speculate about the appearance of Tobey's furniture, since no example had been connected to his shop. With the location of the table in figure 1, however, which is inscribed "E. Tobey," we can now attribute a piece of furniture to this maker.

Since the first initial is an "E" rather than an "L," it appears that the name refers to an owner. The table dates to the 1770s or 1780s and at that time there were at least four people in the New Bedford area who could be identified as "E. Tobey." Of these, three were related to Lemuel: his wife Elizabeth (1755–1835), his father Elisha, Sr. (1723–1781), and his brother Elisha, Jr. (b. 1764). Though Tobey did not have any record in his account books of these individuals having purchased a table, he does note that Elisha, Jr. purchased a desk in October of 1785. Though not conclusive, the strong possibility remains that the table was owned by a family member.

Even without the inscription, the table's design and secondary woods suggest a southeastern Massachusetts origin. Like other examples from the region, its overall form, fine craftsmanship, and some construction details, such as the dovetailed medial cross brace and notched pocket swing legs, reflect the influence of furniture made in Newport, Rhode Island, the region's dominant urban center. Yet the table did not originate there: the unusual diagonal brace on its frame (Fig. 2) and the rounded corners of its leaves—which show no evidence of being reshaped—are not typical of that city's work. This variation on Newport design and construction is found on other New Bedford pieces, most notably in the chest-on-chests (Figs. 3 and 4) of Cornelius Allen (1767–1835) and Ebenezer Allen, Jr. (1755–1793).³

In addition to the table's design, the absence of chestnut or tulip poplar as secondary woods, commonly used in Rhode Island furniture, also links the table to southeastern Massachusetts. Indeed, the maker of this table relied solely on birch, maple, and eastern white pine. Significantly, Tobey noted these woods in his account books, as well as mahogany, black walnut, and red cedar, while he made no entries for either chestnut or tulip poplar.⁴

Based on the inscription, design, and secondary woods, an attribution to Tobey's shop is warranted. A number of forms in his accounts could refer to



Fig. 4: Chest-on-chest, signed by Cornelius Allen (1767–1835) and attributed to Ebenezer Allen, Jr. (1755–1793), New Bedford, Massachusetts, 1785–1790. Signed “Cornelius Allen” and inscribed “Longplain.” The piece originated in Ebenezer’s shop and he undoubtedly led in its manufacture. Mahogany; eastern white pine, birch or cherry. H. 79 7/8 (without finials), W. 43 15/16, D. 23 3/4 in. The finials and plinths are replacements. Courtesy of a private Collection. Photograph Courtesy of Winterthur Museum and by Lazlo Bodo.



this type of table: a “fall” table, a “round cornered tea table,” a “three feet” table, an “esquare table three feet,” or simply a “mahogany table.” Whatever Tobey may have called it, this table demonstrates his proficiency as a craftsman, and its discovery is an essential first step in identifying his body of work.

The second New Bedford area piece is a striking bonnet-top maple chest-on-chest that a conservator recently discovered in a private collection. As with the table, the chest-on-chest (Fig. 5) also has an inscription that connects it to the New Bedford area: “Dartmouth” is written in period script on the back-board of the upper case. The inscription refers to the town of Dartmouth, of which New Bedford was a part prior to 1787. Like the table, the chest’s overall design—with applied panels on the pediment, profiles of the waist and base moldings, and curve of the feet—closely relates to documented Newport examples. However, the lack of chestnut or tulip poplar as secondary woods, the compressed bonnet, and construction variations indicate an origin outside of Newport. The most noteworthy idiosyncrasy are its feet: the maker backed the mitered maple facings of each front foot with two lapped white pine boards and reinforced the laminated assembly with three blocks (Fig. 6).

Based on its overall design and the inscription, one is tempted to attribute the chest to Cornelius Allen, who made a less formal, but similar compressed bonnet-top chest-on-chest (fig. 3) in the late 1780s. However, a number of details, especially the laminated ogee bracket feet, indicate instead the hand of a yet unidentified regional maker other than Allen.⁵

Together, these new discoveries confirm that New Bedford area makers in addition to Ebenezer and Cornelius Allen, fashioned well made, Newport-influenced furniture in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.


For more information on furniture from the region, see *Harbor & Home: Furniture of South-eastern Massachusetts, 1710–1850*, available through University Press of New England; call 603.448.1533 or visit www.upne.com. A traveling exhibition opens at Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware, and runs from March 21 through May 25. It travels to the Nantucket Historical Association Whaling Museum where it will be on view from July 2 through November 2, 2009. For more information visit www.winterthur.org. 

Fig. 5: Chest-on-chest, Dartmouth, Massachusetts, 1770–1790.
Maple; pine, maple. H. 84, W. 42¾, D. 19½ in.
Courtesy of a private collection. Photograph by Kenneth E. Tuttle Antiques.

The author wishes to thank Robert Mussey, Brock Jobe, Joseph Godla, Mia Taradash, Patricia Kane, Bert Lippincott, Laura Pereira, and Nancy C. O'Brien for their help with this article.

Jack O'Brien was a research assistant on *Winterthur's Southeastern Massachusetts Furniture Project* and is a co-author with Brock Jobe and Gary S. Sullivan of *Harbor & Home: Furniture of Southeastern Massachusetts, 1710–1850*.

1. The other identified eighteenth-century pieces include figures 3 and 4, which are both signed and have inscriptions tying them to the area. For other examples see Brock Jobe, Gary R. Sullivan, and Jack O'Brien, *Harbor and Home: Furniture of Southeastern Massachusetts 1710-1850* (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2009), 127–128, 201–203; and Tobey Hall, "New Bedford Furniture," *The Magazine Antiques*, vol.113, no. 5, (May 1978): 1106.
2. Lemuel Tobey account books, Dartmouth, MA. Collection of Old Sturbridge Village Research, 1959.57.1–5. Tobey's output was similar to that of some Newport and Providence makers. See William Mitchell Pillsbury, "The Providence Furniture Making Trade" (master's thesis, Univ. of Delaware, 1975), Appendix B, Table I and Dennis Andrew Carr, "The Account Book of Benjamin Baker," in *American Furniture 2004*, ed. Luke Beckerdite (Milwaukee, WI: Chipstone Foundation, 2004), 47–58.
3. For a detailed examination of the differences between the Allen chest-on-chest and Newport examples, see Jack O'Brien, "A New Bedford Masterpiece," *The Magazine Antiques* 172, 5, May 2007, 138–145.
4. See Ebenezer Allen Jr., estate inventory, May 3, 1793, Bristol County Probate Records, vol. 32, pp. 209–221, Bristol County Probate Court, Taunton, Massachusetts. The Allens also used neither of the latter woods in their chest-on-chests (Fig. 3 and 4).
5. In addition to foot construction, some differences with the Dartmouth chest-on-chest when compared to the Allen maple example include: backboards that run side to side instead of up and down; applied panels and molding on the pediment; a bonnet design that is more compressed; slightly different foot design—note the placement of the spur and the height of the pad; and the Rhode Island two board split is on the bottom of the upper case, rather than the top of the lower case.



Fig. 6. Detail of figure 5 showing the unusual laminated foot construction. Photograph by Joseph Godla.

