

*“The Neat[est] Pieces...
of Any Description”*

PIEDMONT NORTH CAROLINA FURNITURE 1780–1860

by June Lucas

During the last seventy-five years, Piedmont North Carolina factories in towns such as Lexington, Thomasville, and Hickory have produced some of the most recognized fine wood furniture in the United States. Not as well known but equally significant, however, is the Piedmont's much earlier heritage as a producer of high-quality late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century pieces. Upon arrival in North Carolina's Piedmont, immigrant settlers took advantage of the abundant native walnut, cherry, poplar, and yellow pine trees to produce well-made, stylish furniture for their homes. This year the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) in Winston Salem, North Carolina, is celebrating the Piedmont's early furniture-making history with a new exhibit that highlights pieces from its unparalleled collection of locally made early furniture.

Settlement in North Carolina's Piedmont—the hilly region sandwiched between the coastal plain and mountains—did not begin in earnest until the 1740s. During that decade, a slow trickle of settlers, coming mainly down the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and western Virginia, headed south, looking for opportunity in the form of cheap but good land, and in some cases for a place to worship unhindered and live in peace. The slow trickle eventually turned into a deluge, and the total population of North Carolina exploded from approximately 35,000 in 1730 to about 350,000 by the end of the Revolutionary War.¹ Most of the new inhabitants settled in the Piedmont.

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High chest on frame attributed to Jesse Needham (ca. 1774–1838), Walnut and tulip poplar, Guilford or Randolph County, N.C., 1800–1810. H 78½, W. 40⅞, D. 20¾ in. Gift of Dr. Roy E. Truslow in memory of his wife Caroline Gray Truslow and her parents Dr. and Mrs. Eugene Price Gray (5442).

Because cabinetmaker Jesse Needham had close ties to the Quaker community in Randolph and Guilford counties, much of his surviving furniture descended in Quaker families. Many of his neighbors had migrated from the Delaware River Valley where the high chest on frame was a popular furniture form. In his own version of this form, Needham used purely regional embellishments such as the pitch pediment with beveled dentils and applied flowers and quarter fans to create a piece of furniture uniquely identifiable to the Piedmont.⁴ Atypically, the drawers on this piece never had locks.

Cellaret, Guilford or Randolph County, N.C., 1800–1810. Walnut and poplar. H. 31¾, W. 21¾, D. 17½ in. Anonymous Gift (5334).

Although not attributed to Jesse Needham, this cellaret with exuberant cabriole legs, slipper feet, and applied quarter fans was probably made in Randolph or Guilford County as well, and illustrates Needham's impact on the style choices of nearby cabinetmakers and patrons. The cellaret form was very popular in northeast North Carolina but was comparatively rare in North Carolina's back counties. This is the only Needham-inspired cellaret known.





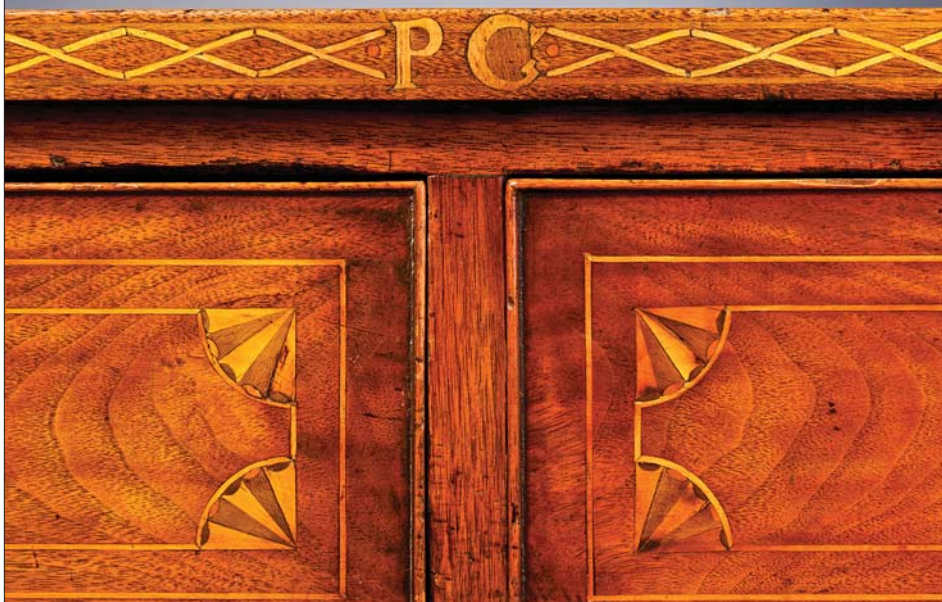


Chest of drawers, Mecklenburg County, N.C., 1810–1820. Walnut and yellow pine. H. 50, W. 36¾, D. 21¼ in. Gift of Mrs. Whaley Batson (3903).

This chest of drawers was made for Polly Glass, whose inlaid initials appear on the front edge of the top. Polly lived just south of the then “trifling” town of Charlotte,⁵ and was part of the large Scotch-Irish population that settled Mecklenburg County. This piece was likely made for her when she married Jonathan Rea in 1816. Jonathan died before 1820, leaving Polly and one surviving daughter. Polly never remarried and lived independently for much of her life. She successfully managed a small farm, and by 1850, owned five slaves and employed a hired laborer. Three other chests with similar French feet and inlay survive, but the maker of this group, and Polly’s monogrammed chest, is unknown.

Chest of drawers possibly by Amos Alexander (1769–1847), Mecklenburg County, N.C., 1790–1800. Walnut, light wood inlay, yellow pine. H. 54¾, W. 32, D. 19¼ in. Gift of Charlotte and Philip Hanes in honor of Thomas A. Gray and his multiple contributions to MESDA and Old Salem (5594.1).

Miniature chest of drawers possibly by Amos Alexander (1769–1847), Mecklenburg County, N.C., 1790–1800. Walnut, light wood inlay, yellow pine. H. 14½, W. 11, D. 8¾ in. Gift of Charlotte and Philip Hanes in honor of Thomas A. Gray and his multiple contributions to MESDA and Old Salem (5594.2).



Scrawled in pencil on the back of a drawer in this small chest of drawers is the name John McCay. McCay was a Scotch-Irish farmer living in northeast Mecklenburg County, and either he or someone in his family, perhaps one of his three daughters, was probably the owner. Living near the McCays was cabinet-maker Amos Alexander, the most likely maker of the piece. Characteristic of his work are the lunetted inlaid heavy bands surrounding the drawer pulls, and the ogee bracket feet with exposed dovetails on the side. However, the pitch pediment with applied scrolls, inlaid decoration, and arched drawer in the tympanum makes this a singular and exceptional object. Amos Alexander probably also made the miniature chest of drawers with the initials “SS,” but the original owner is unknown.



Secretary and bookcase, Lincoln or Gaston County, N.C., 1790–1800. Cherry, walnut, light wood inlay, yellow pine. H. 105¼, W. 43½, D. 23½ in. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Borden Hanes, Sr. (2845).

General Joseph Graham was the reputed owner of this imposing secretary and bookcase. Born in Pennsylvania, Graham moved to Mecklenburg County as a small boy with his widowed mother and joined the Scotch-Irish Presbyterian community that flourished in the region. His brave service in the American Revolution made him a revered North Carolina war hero. After the war, he moved across the Catawba River to Lincoln County, where he became part owner of the Vesuvius Furnace, a major iron producer. His secretary and bookcase is typical of the large, impressive pieces created in the Lincoln/Gaston County region.⁶ The maker, still unidentified, clearly catered to the elite landowners and businessmen in the area.



High chest of drawers, Alamance County, N.C., 1796. Walnut, sulfur inlay, tulip poplar. H. 56, W. 41½, D. 20¼ in. MESDA Purchase Fund (5568).

This piece was made for George and Barbara Foust, German Lutherans, whose families had migrated from Pennsylvania to North Carolina in the mid-eighteenth century. George was a successful blacksmith and farmer who, at the time of his death in 1836, owned large tracts of land, twenty-three slaves, and furnishings like this chest of drawers with sulfur inlay. To create the inlaid decoration, including George and Barbara's initials and the 1796 date of construction, the craftsman poured molten sulfur into carved channels. This high chest is part of a regional furniture group identified by its decorative use of sulfur inlay. Of the surviving pieces from the group, the Foust high chest is the most elaborate. All other pieces with known histories descended in Quaker families, suggesting that the maker may have been part of the large Quaker community living near the German Lutherans and Reformed in Alamance County.

Corner Cupboard, John Swisegood (1796-1874), Davidson County, N.C., 1820-1830. Walnut, light and dark wood inlay, yellow pine, tulip poplar. H. 95½, W. 36½ in. Gift of the Estate of Elizabeth Motzinger (4980).

Trained by Mordicai Collins, who emigrated to North Carolina from New Market, Virginia, in 1803, John Swisegood was part of a cabinetmaking school working in northeastern Davidson County in the first half of the nineteenth century. Jonathan Long and Jesse Clodfelter were also part of the Collins-Swisegood School. Although Collins was not of Germanic descent, the three men associated with him were, and most of the surviving furniture from this group with known histories descended in German families. This corner cupboard exhibits the group's characteristic urn-shaped finals, fan-shaped plinth, applied pilasters on each side of the door, barber pole inlay, and lower door panels with lunetted corners. The applied heart on the plinth is a rare but very desirable form of decoration on pieces in this group.⁷



Cupboard, John Swisegood (1796-1874), Davidson County, N.C., 1820-1835. Walnut, light wood inlay, cherry, yellow pine, tulip poplar. H. 85¾, W. 62, D. 20¾ in. MESDA Purchase Fund (2127).

John Swisegood made this flat back cupboard, probably for Susannah Sink, who married David H. Leonard in 1832. The cupboard may have been a wedding gift for the new bride, or it may have been a slightly later acquisition for the Leonard household. In the 1870s the cupboard descended to Susannah and David's youngest daughter, Crissie Jane, perhaps on the occasion of her 1871 marriage to Robert Julian Wagner. According to Crissie Jane's son, it was one of his mother's most treasured possessions. The cupboard boasts one of the signature characteristics associated with Collins-Swisegood School pieces, "comma" inlay on the four corners of the drawers. As with most cupboards in the group, the backboards were painted, but in this instance, paint analysis revealed that they were originally a slate gray rather than the more common Prussian blue. Prized white dishes would have popped on this exceptionally dark background.



Blanket chest, Wilkes County, N.C., 1850–1860. Poplar and paint. H. 20¾, W 40, D 22½ in. Given in memory of Butrice Johnson Luffman by her daughters Winnie Luffman, Jean Luffman Humber, and Lucy Luffman Dearing (5547).

This small chest with spotted paint decoration was probably made for Nancy Wyatt Adams who lived in the foothills of Wilkes County before the Civil War. Her daughter Elizabeth Adams married Sidney Johnson in 1880 and, according to family tradition, packed her belongings into the chest to take to her new husband's small frame home. The chest stayed in the family until it was donated to MESDA in 2010. This piece was carpenter-made with basic tools and hand wrought hinges; a member of the family probably painted it. Simple chests such as this were the most common storage form used in the North Carolina Piedmont.

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These new Carolinians came from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds and formed a “cultural patchwork” in the center of the state: they tended to segregate in clusters with people who spoke the same language, observed similar religious practices, and were of the same ethnic background. In the eastern and central Piedmont were many English settlers, including a few Anglicans and numerous Quakers. In the central and western Piedmont were pockets of Germans, including Lutherans, German Reformed, and Moravians. Highland Scots congregated on the southeastern edge of the Piedmont, while the Scotch-Irish, by far the largest group of immigrants, were widely dispersed throughout the region. These latter two groups were most often Presbyterians.²

Regardless of ethnic background, most eighteenth-century settlers in the Piedmont were non-slave-holding farming families who lived in one- or two-room log structures. Some combined farming with the operation of cottage industries such as sawmills, gristmills, potteries, and blacksmith's shops. Although market towns grew up around county courthouses and major transportation routes, as late as 1790, most were no more than villages of a few hundred people.

By the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the children and grandchildren of the first wave of settlers had intermarried, raised their own children, and embraced English as their common language. Ethnic integration fast became the norm. Although most residents were still small farmers living very simply, a growing number of industrious planters and businessmen accumulated fortunes, becoming part of an emerging backcountry elite. These fortunate few generally lived in frame or possibly even brick houses rather than log ones and may have owned slaves.

Throughout both the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a diverse group of cabinetmakers in the Piedmont combined ethnic

designs, national trends, and idiosyncratic preferences to produce regional furniture for this burgeoning North Carolina population. The result was a distinctive and pleasing style that reflects the Piedmont's cultural heritage and justifies one early journalist's description of Piedmont-made furniture as “the neat[est] pieces...of any description.”³ AEA

“The Neatest Pieces...of Any Description”: Piedmont North Carolina Furniture 1780–1860 is on view through Fall 2011 at the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA), at Old Salem Museums and Gardens in Winston Salem, North Carolina. Admission to the exhibit is free of charge. For more information or to see the exhibit online visit www.mesda.org, or call 336.721.7360.

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1. Catherine W. Bishir and Michael T. Southern, *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Piedmont North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003), 9–10.
2. Ibid. 12–13.
3. *Western Carolinian*, 25 February, 1823.
4. John Bivins Jr., “A Piedmont North Carolina Cabinetmaker: The Development of Regional Style,” *The Magazine Antiques* (May 1973): 968–973.
5. Archibald Henderson, *Washington's Southern Tour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1923), 289.
6. Luke Beckerdite, “The Development of Regional Style in the Catawba River Valley: A Further Look,” *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts* (November 1981): 31–48.
7. Frank L. Horton and Carolyn J. Weekley, *The Swisegood School of Cabinetmaking* (High Point: Hall Printing Company, 1973).