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A Background to Decorative Arts in Lexington: 1792-1820

Mary Jane Elliott

In 1961, Clay Lancaster published a detailed architectural study of the homes and institutional buildings erected in Lexington and Fayette County, Kentucky in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This model of documentary scholarship, *Ante Bellum Houses of the Bluegrass*, interprets the rich achievements of Lexington's early architects and builders. Although the decorative arts are more transitory by far, the sophistication of Lexington's architecture appears to have been equaled in its interior embellishments.¹

Lexington and its environs were early established as a center of cultivated taste. By 1820, Timothy Flint could comment on "the frequency of handsome villas, and fine and ornamental rural mansions"—homes of the kind which Thomas Ashe, fourteen years prior, noted were "furnished with some pretensions to European elegance."² Another early visitor discovered planters "generally rich and opulent," including many with "coaches and carriages, made at Lexington (in the four large carriage shops), that cost one thousand dollars."³ The tax rolls of 1810 reveal not only such formidable industries as rope walks, bagging works, paper mills, foundries, and nail factories; there were, in addition, four chair factories, four cabinet shops, a Venetian blind factory, and a looking glass factory. These were manned chiefly by skilled workmen from the East or from Europe who catered to the demanding tastes of the early Lexingtonians. Moreover, household objects were regularly shipped via boat and wagon from Philadelphia and other Eastern centers.

Influential thought, as well, came in the form of publications. Lexington window seats, noted one observer, were strewn with "the new and most interesting publications."⁴ Not *belles lettres* alone, but broader ideas and trends were well-represented on the shelves of the booksellers who stocked current selections. Evident among various contemporary records, books dealing with household matters, architecture, or the manual arts illustrate early

influences in taste and design. One significant document bearing on this topic is an invoice of 22 May 1795 for book stock sold to John Wesley Hunt (1772-1849) and his brother Abijah of Lexington by the Philadelphia publisher and book dealer Mathew Carey. Included among the extensive inventory were *Rudiments of Taste* by Mrs. M. Peddle, *The Builder's Jewel* by the prolific English architectural writer Batty Langley, and *Town and Country Builder* by John Norman.⁵ *Kentucky Gazette* advertisements of 1809 and 1810 enumerate Alexander Adam's *Roman Antiquities*, A. F. M. Willich's *Domestic Encyclopedia*, and a title simply given as *Connoisseur* [sic]. An advertisement for *The Builder's Pocket Treasury* may refer to yet another work by Batty Langley in a popularized form; and Owen Biddle's *The Young Carpenter's Assistant; or A System of Architecture, Adapted to the Style of Building in the United States* bore not only the 1810 Philadelphia imprint of Johnson and Warner, but the additional note, "sold at their Book Stores in Philadelphia, Richmond, Va., and Lexington, Ky."⁶ In 1813 Daniel Bradford lists new books from Philadelphia, and these again include Biddle's *Carpenter's Assistant* and the *Domestic Encyclopedia* as well as Alexander Gerard's *An Essay on Taste* and James Cutbush's *The American Artist's Manual; or Dictionary of Practical Knowledge in the Application of Philosophy to the Arts and Manufactures*.⁷

Once refinements of taste were inculcated, it was the task of the local artisan to realize in wood, silver, marble, or plaster the objects bespoke from him. A local merchant, George Anderson, announced on his return from Philadelphia in 1805 that he could supply "Cabinetmakers and Carpenter's Tools; Stock Plains [sic]; Chisels; Goughes [sic]; Augurs; Drawing Knives; Vices; Mill, Pit, Cross Cut, Veneering and Hand Saws."⁸ These were the instruments with which Henry Clay's brother Porter Clay (1779-1850), "Josiah," and others fashioned from cherry, poplar, walnut, and other woods the fine specimens of handmade furniture which, with imported examples, appointed Lexington's parlors and drawing rooms.

In 1802 Peter Paul and his son, both "lately from London," began cutting stone near Lexington. They supplied "tombstones, grave stones, marble chimney pieces, safes to preserve papers, etc." to the Lexington community.⁹ John Johnston emigrated from Philadelphia in 1806, and Robert Armstrong arrived from Charleston, South Carolina, in 1815. Both men executed

ornamental plaster and stucco work. Armstrong also offered "cornices, [and] centerpieces, plain or fancy."¹⁰ There was obviously a market for his skills in the Lexington area, as his advertisements reappear in the newspapers through 1820 and beyond. The date of Robert Armstrong's arrival from South Carolina indicates that he worked there around the time the Charleston home of Nathaniel Russell was under construction in the Adam style. This structure was completed by 1809 and contains magnificent stucco and plaster work with which he must have been familiar.¹¹

Painting, glazing, and paperhanging were profitable occupations in the early nineteenth century. Lexington supported five men who were prepared to do this work. Francis Downing and Company were the first to advertise their skills. In 1805 they stated that:

They are prepared to do house painting, sign painting, papering, gilding and repairing old looking glasses, also take shaded and cut profile likenesses with the physiagnotrace [sic]. Four apprentices will be taken, if they call at an early date.¹²

The firm of Levett and Smith, which owned the Lexington Oil Floor-Cloth Factory, also painted signs and interiors and made its own paints. An advertisement of 1810 mentions a supply of Dutch wax cloths, which it also manufactured. These cloths were probably used much as a tablecloth is used today. The services and products of Levett and Smith were described as follows:

Messrs. Levett and Smith advertise they have a mill to grind paint and prepare colours for town and country. They execute House and Sign Painting, Gilding, Glazing, Paperhanging and as usual in town and country. Dutch Wax Cloths for side boards and table covers superior to any imported, prepared by Messrs. Levett and Smith.¹³

By 1816 John Grant and Francis Downing had formed a partnership and were advertising French and American paperhangings, as well as handsome figures for chimney boards.¹⁴ French paperhangings and ornamental plaster work were not the only eye-catching features the local citizenry could introduce into their household interiors.

Lexington families of ample means commissioned portraits from resident artists and bought paintings and prints from local merchants. A portrait painter, J. Cook, was employed in the home of William Hart in 1812, and William Brown advertised to the Lexington public in the same year his facility as a miniature painter.¹⁵ Two years later the *Kentucky Gazette* announced the arrival of a portraitist, Mr. Haskins, from Philadelphia.¹⁶ In 1813 a notice appeared in the *Kentucky Gazette* announcing an auction for the estate of the English-born artist George Beck (1749-1812). Offered along with the general assortment of household furnishings was a group of engravings described as "chiefly Landscapes by the best artists and from the greatest painters of the Italian, German, Dutch and French schools".¹⁷ Although a published notice gives no indication of values, the inventory of Capt. Nathaniel G. T. Hart (d. 1813), a local merchant, showed three engraved landscapes to be worth \$5.00.¹⁸ A year later, in 1814, another auction notice revealed that a valuable collection of paintings, drawings, engravings, rare books, and a fine-toned violin were to be offered for sale. A brief sampling included:

Violin at \$100.00 . . .
Views from Nature \$75.00
Highly finished emblematical figures
Harmony and Meekness at \$60.00 each . . .
Potter's *Antiquities*, embellished with plates, 8 volumes
\$30.00. . . .¹⁹

Looking glasses in marble and gilt frames, both large and small, were advertised in the *Kentucky Gazette* in 1805.²⁰ Most inventories listing extensive personal possessions include one or more looking glasses. The average appraisal value is \$2.00 or \$3.00, although the range varies. The 1811 inventory of property belonging to the estate of Hugh Meglove lists "one mirror \$15.00," yet a "looking glass 25 cents" shows up in an inventory of Benjamin Welsh.²¹ The record of Nathaniel Hart's estate mentions two dressing glasses valued at \$6.00 along with two dressing tables valued at but \$2.00. The low dollar value assigned to these glasses suggests that they were not large ones, for Elijah Warner's 1829 inventory includes "one pair large pier glass (old, formerly Parkers), \$60."²² Since Lexington tax records show a looking glass factory operating in 1810, it is not surprising that looking glasses

frequently appear in household inventories.

Metal workers were active in Lexington as early as 1789, when Charles White, of New York, coppersmith, is mentioned in the *Kentucky Gazette*.²³ Seven years later John and David Coons, coppersmiths from Berkley County, Virginia, informed the public of the opening of their new shop.²⁴ Joseph Harbeson worked in Philadelphia as a coppersmith from 1793 until 1805.²⁵ In 1806 the *Kentucky Gazette* carried his advertisement: "Joseph Harbeson, just from Philadelphia, at the Sign of the Still, advertises for two apprentices in copper and tin business."²⁶ By 1813 Ichabod Woodruff opened his brass foundry and also announced his intention to do silverplating. Apparently successful in his undertaking, Woodruff took David Austin Sayre (1793-1870), the future banker and founder of Sayre School, on as his partner in the silver plating business two years later.²⁷

H. L. Palmer, originally from Philadelphia, advertised in the 1809 *Reporter* his ability to make clocks and watches as well as jewelry. He published prices for a half-dozen tablespoons, engraved for free, at just \$6.00. Teaspoons were \$2.00 per half-dozen.²⁸ In that same year of 1809, Martin Smith, a Fayette County resident, died, and his estate, which was valued at thirty-two pounds, contained several references to metal objects.

Two Brass Candlesticks	Fifteen Shillings
Knife Box and a Parcel of Old Knives and Forks	Three Shillings
Copper Teakettle	Ten Shillings
Silver Sugar Tongs and Six Tea Spoons	One Pound, Eight Shillings
Pewter Dish, Basin and Eleven Pewter Plates	One Pound ²⁹

In 1810 H. L. Palmer (the jeweler, clock, and watch maker working in Lexington in 1809), encountered competition in the form of another watchmaker, David Humphreys, who informed the public:

David Humphreys Watch and Clock Maker, carries on the above business in the town of Lexington, two doors above the insurance bank, at the sign of the *Watch*. Orders in his line will be faithfully and punctually executed.³⁰

Among estate inventories listing either a clock or clock and case, the timepiece is always the most expensive item evaluated. Two references in 1809 record a clock valued at \$65.00 and a clock and case for \$80.00.³¹ In 1813 a \$100.00 clock and case was in John Springle's estate, and Nathaniel Hart's inventory lists an \$80.00 clock the same year.³²

There is no evidence of a pottery factory in Fayette County during the period of this essay, but inventories enumerate household pottery and porcelain. Nathaniel Hart's estate of 1813 lists one set of table china at \$50.00, one set of tea china at \$4.00, and one lot of Queensware (cream-colored earthenware) at \$15.00.³³ Similarly, there is no record of a glass manufactory in Lexington, but inventories such as John Springle's of 1813 list two decanters valued at \$2.00 and three tumblers, two goblets, six wine glasses, and one gilly glass valued at \$5.00.³⁴ Obviously, these glass items could have been imported from the East Coast or Pittsburgh without considerable difficulty.

Textiles are mentioned several times in inventories, usually in connection with carpeting. The estate of Thomas Lewis, appraised in 1809, lists a carpet for the drawing room valued at \$15.00 and a homemade hall carpet worth \$10.00.³⁵ Rag carpeting, generally appraised at about \$.25 per yard, could be found in several homes.³⁶ Window "blines" [sic] and curtains were itemized in the inventories of two middle-class residents of the city. The appraisal value for "five window blines and curtains one dollar twenty five cents,"³⁷ is low enough that one can assume these were either made of a homespun or of a cheaper muslin-type of material, or that they were very old and worn. Elijah Warner's inventory of 1829 lists two paper window blinds valued at \$.25 apiece and three Venetian window blinds valued at \$4.00 each.³⁸

Musical training, and hence musical instruments, were an integral part of home life in Lexington. One need only refer to such advertisements as that by John J. Abercrombie in which he offers to the citizenry in 1810 piano, guitar, and violin instruction. Prior to Mr. Abercrombie's arrival, Joseph Green was making pianofortes and offering them to the public for \$180.00 each:

Joseph Green begs leave to acquaint the public that with the assistance from a gentleman from London he has commenced making patent piano fortes with additional keys, quality, touch and tone. Pianos constructed in the usual way are not

calculated to resist the effects of changeable climate and he has manufactured his up solid of construction, upon such secure plan as to remove doubts of their durability. Orders can be placed at the manufactory on Main Street where a specimen can be seen.³⁹

By 1816 both George Geib and T. L. Eveden were advertising their pianofortes:

George Geib's Wholesale and Retail Music Store.
Piano Fortes are manufactured by John Geib and Son who have upwards of five thousand in Europe and America.
Eight Grecian legged three stringed.
Six Grecian legged two stringed square cornered.
Six Grecian legged two stringed round cornered.
Four Grecian legged two stringed plain cornered.⁴⁰

Presumably the "John Geib and Son" mentioned in this 1814 advertisement is the same New York firm which produced the mahogany and satinwood pianoforte (ca. 1804-1814) in the Federal Parlor at the Winterthur Museum in Wilmington, Delaware and the mechanical action of the pianoforte (1818) in Winterthur's Playfe Room. George Geib of Lexington is probably the middle brother of the three sons of John Geib (1744-1819).⁴¹ Eveden stated that he worked at his trade many years in London and for five years in Philadelphia. Competition from imported work led him in 1816 to appeal to the local citizenry and their "patriotic spirit of domestic manufactory," saying that London pianofortes, "besides drawing so much wealth from the country, often come to hand much injured".⁴²

To gain some insight into the extent and type of furnishings found in a Lexington home during the period between 1792 and 1820, one may select a random sampling of articles from the inventories of individuals representing different economic groups. As one might suspect, the higher the dollar value of an estate, the greater the sophistication, variation, and accumulation of the household furnishings.

John Wesley Hunt, the prosperous Lexington merchant, completed his Federal style Lexington townhouse, Hopemont, in 1814. When he died in 1849, his total estate amounted to a sizeable \$891,294.97. Out of this total, \$4,305.69 was allotted to

the articles enumerated under the heading "Residence Furniture" and including in part the following:

Two doz. chairs \$72.00	Sofas \$64.00
Pier table \$25.00	Three rocking chairs \$24.00
Center table \$20.00	Card table \$25.00
Umbrella stand \$3.00	Forty-six yards hall carpet
Side board \$10.00	\$47.00
Cane rocking chair \$2.50	Twelve maple chairs \$15.00
East India China \$50.00	Doz. cane chairs \$12.00
Celleret glasses \$6.50	Blue china \$25.00
Buffet \$50.00	White and blue china \$3.00
Spittoons \$6.00	Nest of glass dishes \$15.00 ⁴³

William Russell, who lived about two miles outside of Lexington, died in 1830, leaving an estate valued at \$17,524.75. Of this amount, \$2,800 was appraised as household furnishings. Along with the usual kitchen and other homemaking needs, Mr. Russell was possessed of the following pieces of furniture:

Two settees \$15.00
One doz. fancy chairs (Red) \$15.00
One pr. half round tables \$10.00
One Backgammon table \$1.00
Ten fancy chairs (Yellow) \$5.00
Two high post bedsteads \$25.00 each
One sideboard \$8.00
Clock \$40.00
Desk and Bookcase \$6.00
One small table \$1.00
Two common settees \$6.00
Two small tables \$2.00 ⁴⁴

Finally, there is the inventory of Jonathan Parrish, who died in 1828, leaving an estate of \$8,595 that comprised in part:

One Water Stand and can \$.75
One folding table \$1.75
One Beauró [sic] and bookcase \$8.00
One Beauró [sic] \$5.00
One set Madison tables \$15.00
Six yellow Windsor chairs \$7.50

Six green Windsor chairs \$2.50
Nine flagg bottom chairs \$2.00
One small table and sugar desk \$2.00⁴⁵

Throughout all the inventories of the period the number of chairs and settees is more than the average twentieth-century taste dictates. In Lexington and Fayette County the rooms were probably as filled with seating pieces as the Federal parlors of the East Coast. Chairs and settees which were valued the highest in estate holdings were almost always described as painted, fancy furniture or simply referred to by color. Windsor chairs commanded a higher valuation than the chairs listed as "common," "setting," "split-bottom," "shucked-bottom," or "flagg-bottom" chairs. John Springle's estate in 1813 lists six fancy chairs for \$3.00 apiece among other items, whereas the inventory of the kitchen shows six flag chairs for just \$2.00.⁴⁶ Nathaniel Hart's inventory, recorded the same year, lists the following painted furniture:

One dozen white and black chairs \$18.00
Two settees (white and black) \$12.00
Eighteen black and yellow chairs \$18.00
One green settee \$4.00⁴⁷

Comparison with new seating pieces being offered at the time is favorable. Four years prior to this, William Challen, a craftsman from New York, notified the Lexington community of his new business.

FANCY CHAIRS

William Challen respectfully informs the public that he has commenced the Fancy Chairs making business, next door to Messrs. Daniel and Charles Bradford's printing office where he will carry on the above business with neatness and taste;—he flatters himself that from the long experience that he has had both in London and New York, that his work will please those who may call on him. He has on hand and makes Black and Gold—White and Ditto—Brown and Ditto—Green and Ditto—Coquelico [sic] and Ditto—Bamboo, etc. Likewise settees to match any of the above description, all of which will be made in the neatest fashion and highly varnished which can be packed to send to any

part of the State without injury. He likewise makes Windsor chairs—all orders will be thankfully received and attended to with punctuality and dispatch, and his price is made reasonable.⁴⁸

Another furniture form often listed in Lexington inventories is the sideboard. The paper manufacturer Ebenezer Stedman, in writing of his father's house, which was completed about 1818, states:

As soon as the House was Finished Father had the Finest Firtiture that Could be Got at that time. The house was well Furnished from top to Bottom.

I Recollect one piece of Furnitur in partikular & that was a large fine Side Board, and on the top was a number of Fine Decanters & Glasses. Thare was in them and they ware alwais Kept full: Brandy, whiskey, Rum, wine, cordials. And thare it was free for anny one to help themselves. And thare was alwais plenty to Do so, [as] we had a Great Deal of Company. It was at this Side Bord that i first saw Henry Clay.⁴⁹

Both the wealthy merchant John Wesley Hunt, and the upper middle class citizen, William Russell, owned sideboards. Inventories show a sideboard in an 1809 estate valued at \$30.00, one listed in 1812 is valued at \$20.00, and another two recorded in 1813 are valued at \$70.00 and \$80.00 respectively.⁵⁰

A furniture form that appears to be unique to the Kentucky-Tennessee region is the sugar chest, or "sugar desk," as most inventories designate it. Until the steamboat *Enterprise* made its maiden voyage upstream from New Orleans to Maysville and Louisville in 1815, sugar was a precious commodity, and cabinet makers supplied sugar desks with strong locks to store the valuable merchandise. In 1809 Benjamin Welsh's inventory lists a sugar desk for \$1.00, and William Boyce's inventory of 1812 lists one sugar desk valued at \$4.50.⁵¹ By way of comparison, Thomas Lewis's estate of the same year records a loaf of sugar for \$27.00 and brown sugar for \$15.00. This price is in line with that in Nathaniel Hart's inventory of 1813, listing one block of New Orleans sugar valued at \$30.00.⁵²

Whether an inventory lists chairs, settees, sideboards, sugar



*A Kentucky chest attributed to Porter Clay, brother of Henry Clay.
(Hunt-Morgan House Collection, Blue Grass Trust for Historic
Preservation)*

desks, backgammon tables, or any other furniture form, it is not until 1829 that the use of mahogany is mentioned in an inventory, that of the furniture maker Elijah Warner. Prior to this, whenever a type of wood is mentioned to distinguish various pieces, it is always cherry or walnut. As early as 1817 J. C. Wenzel advertised his mahogany veneers from Jamaica.⁵³ Although mahogany was available, it was obviously cheaper and more convenient to use native woods, such as walnut or cherry. The walnut and cherry furniture in inventories was thus evaluated quite modestly. For instance, in John Wesley Hunt's inventory twelve maple chairs are valued at but \$15.00.⁵⁴ Listed below are the other walnut and cherry pieces found in household inventories of this period.

Date	Inventory	Item	Cost
1798	David Leitch	Cherry Tree Desk	6 Shillings
1802	Samuel McCrosky	Walnut Table	8 Shillings
		Cherry Table	4 Shillings
1808	Will Parrish	Square Walnut Table	\$2.00
1809	Benjamin Welsh	Walnut Table	\$1.50
		Walnut Chest	\$2.00
1809	John Curry	Walnut Bed Stead	10 Shillings
1811	Hugh Meglove	Walnut Table	\$7.50 ⁵⁵

Within their homes, the citizens of Lexington appear to have surrounded themselves with comfortable and stylish furniture, though often it was crafted of cherry or walnut. This is perhaps one of the more significant insights to emerge from investigating attributable Kentucky cabinet work.

So versatile were the craftsmen residing in Lexington in the period 1792-1820 that, collectively, they were able to supplement to an appreciable extent the household goods shipped from the East Coast with local products and materials. Lexington's first city directory was published by Joseph Charless (1772-1834) in 1806, and it catalogs a large number of craftsmen, including quite a few cabinetmakers, chairmakers, reed makers, and house carpenters. Charless himself came to Lexington in 1803 from Philadelphia and established a printing office and bookstore on Main Street. He was later the publisher of the *Directory of the Town of Lexington for 1818*, which again lists chair and cabinet makers, a gilder, and a

pianoforte maker.⁵⁶ Many of these artisans diversified. Frequently, a cabinetmaker or chairmaker advertised that he was taking on the merchandising of a manufactured product or adding a new line of work. Some of the crafts appear to have been both profitable and industrialized by 1820, often employing a number of apprentices. It is, therefore, not surprising that a number of craftsmen were in other ways active and contributing members of the community. The *Kentucky Gazette* of 1809, for example, contains a significant statement by Edward West (1757-1827), a clockmaker who resided in Lexington as early as 1785 and who was the father of the painter William Edward West (1788-1857). The notice describes the latest actions taken by the city trustees. The trustees were a powerful group of men who oversaw the maintenance of the town and controlled the allocation of funds for municipal works projects. West was elected to the position of chairman of the Trustees of Lexington in 1809.⁵⁷ Archibald McIlvain, a cabinetmaker, held office several times between 1803 and 1815 as a county commissioner for various works projects. The Fayette County Court in 1813 appointed him one of three commissioners for the drawing of the new boundaries for the Boonesboro Road. This was a main southern artery for Virginia travelers coming to Lexington and was the last link on the Wilderness Road from the Cumberland Gap to Lexington.⁵⁸

Further evidence of community involvement appears in 1816, when the *Kentucky Gazette* published a list of subscribers to a proposed Fayette Hospital. Included with the names of a number of well-known merchants and wealthy men of the community was that of the chairmaker Robert Holmes.⁵⁹ Abraham Barton, a cabinetmaker working in Lexington as early as 1805, is mentioned in Henry Clay's correspondence of 1817 and 1819. By this time Barton was in business as a merchandiser with Craig and Company, and, obviously, he had made a name for himself in Lexington financial circles. Clay wrote from Washington on 10 January 1817 to John Wesley Hunt recommending Barton as a director of the Bank of the United States. Two years later, on 19 January 1819, Clay again wrote and recommended Barton to the board of directors for the office of Discount and Deposit of the Bank of the United States.⁶⁰ When Elijah Warner died in 1829, his published accounts showed that this one-time clock and cabinetmaker had become a substantial merchant, with assets of \$55,330.12.⁶¹ It seems obvious, therefore, that some members of

the trades were well regarded in the community, achieving positions of civic responsibility and social prominence.

While a few craftsmen abandoned their trades as they became major forces in the community, many others continued and expanded their operations as economic conditions permitted. There are a number of advertisements in the local newspapers for apprentices to the cabinetmaking and chairmaking businesses, indicating a healthy demand for the skills of the woodworker. Among the recollections recorded by Dr. Robert Peter (1805-1894) in his *History of Fayette County* are two chronicles of the apprenticeship system as practiced in Lexington in the early nineteenth century. Thomas Sutton, orphaned at the age of eight years old, began a nine-year apprenticeship at the age of thirteen with James Marsh, a cabinetmaker. During this nine-year period, the master was to devote eighteen months to schooling. In actual practice Mr. Sutton recalled that he was only given about nine months of schooling. For two and a half years following his apprenticeship he worked for his former master as a journeyman. Finally, four years later he opened his own shop. Another apprentice remembered that at the end of his indenture period he was given several tools and a complimentary reference: "one hand saw, one jack plane, one fore plane, one smoothing plane, and a recommendation as a faithful and true man."⁶²

Robert Holmes, the chairmaker, received at least three apprentices. In 1803 James Carter was bound to him, and in 1810 Israel Gibson was apprenticed to learn the crafts of chair and wheel making. During 1805 the Orphan's Court named Robert Holmes as the recipient of the services of a boy to learn Holmes's trade.⁶³ Porter Clay, the brother of Henry Clay, was a cabinetmaker in his youth and later became an attorney and a minister. In 1804 Clay received an apprentice from the Court, nineteen year old George Armstrong.⁶⁴ Five years later, in 1809, he advertised for four men to saw wood for him:

Wanted Immediately Two Pair of Sawyers [sic] for which 12 dollar per month, will be given to white men, and 10 dollar for black men, and if required, one half of the first months wages shall be paid in advance, and may have employment from one to six months.⁶⁵

The cabinetmaker Benjamin Parrish took on the services of an

apprentice named John Brown in 1803.⁶⁶ Three turners advertised for apprentices and journeymen in 1810; one of them, Samuel Long, wished to employ a man already acquainted with the wood turning business and promised liberal wages.⁶⁷ In the following month the partners Marsh and Studman advertised for apprentices in their blacksmith and turning shop:

Marsh and Studman want eight apprentices: four to the white and blacksmith's trade, and four to the turning business. Young lads from 14 to 16 years of age will meet with great encouragement at their shop next below the Theatre on Water Street.⁶⁸

There were at least three men with the surname of Megowan working and advertising in Lexington in the early nineteenth century. Perhaps brothers or members of more than one generation, they included two cabinetmakers, James and Thomas, and one carpenter, David. David Megowan was in partnership with a man named Ball when he advertised for a number of apprentices in the *American Statesman* in 1811: "Wanted Immediately Four Apprentices to the Carpenter's Trade. Megowan & Ball."⁶⁹ Three years later David Megowan again advertised, but this time it was for a mulatto runaway named Jesse, who at eighteen years of age had acquired some manual skill: "He has worked for some time at the carpenter's trade."⁷⁰ The two cabinetmaking Megowans seem to have been successful in their craft. James Megowan opened a cabinetmaking shop in Lexington in 1812, and by 1813 he advertised for three or four journeyman cabinetmakers who were good workmen and to whom he would pay high wages in cash.⁷¹ Several years later, Thomas B. Megowan took Joseph Milward and Nathaniel Shaw as apprentices into his cabinetmaking shop.⁷²

Many Lexington cabinetmakers seem to have flourished, and it was this prosperous state of their businesses which dictated a need for extra help in the form of journeymen and apprentices. By acquiring additional hands, some with varied skills, cabinetmakers and chairmakers could introduce a substantial degree of versatility into their craft operations. Joseph Putman, a cabinetmaker, advertised in 1795 that he was manufacturing wool machine cards in addition to the usual products of his shop.⁷³ The chairmaker Robert Holmes needed hog bristles for his brush factory in 1804.

Within his establishment he also made Windsor chairs and spinning wheels.⁷⁴ J. H. Vos and a Mr. Gaunt publicized their fancy and Windsor chair business in 1813. They carried on the house and sign painting trade, as well, and also did paper hanging.⁷⁵ Two other chairmakers advertised their willingness to repair old chairs. The first, Daniel Spencer, specialized in making new reed-bottom chairs in 1793, but he also made repairs on all types of other chairs.⁷⁶ In 1805 Issac Holmes, a Windsor chair and spinning wheel maker, advertised that he accepted orders for repairs from any part of the surrounding country.⁷⁷

One of the most interesting subsidiary occupations carried on by a cabinetmaker was pursued by Thomas Whitney. He advertised for sale in 1814 the patent rights for a cotton spinning machine:

Patent rights for a single machine 15 dollars. The mettle [sic] parts will be furnished for six or any large number of spindles at five dollars per spindle.

Cotton spinners are respectfully invited to call and see this simple and expeditious mode of spinning cotton.

TO MECHANICS

Cabinetmakers, Carpenters, Turners in wood and iron, Black and Whitesmiths, Brass Founders and Filers, are wanted to make the several parts of a Spinning Machine.

The highest price will be given for two inch cherry and four inch poplar of the best quality, seasoned.⁷⁸

Perhaps the most profitable outside source of income for cabinetmakers and chairmakers was the occupation of undertaking. From 1797 to 1820 there are numerous listings in the will books of Fayette County by known woodworking craftsmen for providing coffins and burial arrangements.⁷⁹

Unhappily, almost no labeled or marked pieces of furniture are attributable to any known Lexington cabinetmaker of the period surveyed in this discussion. At present, there are two known pieces of labeled furniture made by early Lexington cabinetmakers, although one piece was clearly not made in Lexington. In 1799 the *Kentucky Gazette* advertised that John Goodman had for sale "a fine quantity of cabinet work, desks, tables, chairs, etc., at John Coon's, or at my factory on Cross Street, opposite Colonel Hart's

nail factory."⁸⁰ This is the same John Goodman who made a piano in 1801 in Frankfort, Kentucky for Senator John Brown (1757-1837) of Liberty Hall. Obviously, Goodman's services were in demand. He apparently divided his time between the two cities, for the label on the Brown piano clearly reads: "John Goodman/Frankfort, Kentucky/1801."⁸¹ The Anglo-American Art Museum at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge contains a cherry chest of drawers bearing the signature of Elijah Warner in ink inside the top drawer.⁸² This is the same Elijah Warner who practiced the cabinetmaking trade in Lexington from about 1795 to 1810 and who died in 1829 as a wealthy merchant and trader.

The examination of early wills and inventories, and of contemporary advertising notices, provides a well-documented sense of the flourishing material culture which prevailed in early Lexington and Fayette County, as well as in the larger central Bluegrass region. These records demonstrate both the productivity and the variety of work accomplished by the early craftsmen and artisans practicing in the city and its surrounding area. And, of course, the handsome remaining artifacts themselves confirm and continue to express the sophistication, refinement, and taste in the decorative arts that emerged in Kentucky with the founding of the Commonwealth itself.

NOTES

¹ For further discussion of the subject of this essay see Elizabeth M. Simpson, *Bluegrass Houses and Their Traditions* (Lexington, Kentucky: Transylvania Press, 1932) and *The Enchanted Bluegrass* (Lexington, Kentucky: Transylvania Press, 1938); Nancy Willis Shury, "Early Kentucky Cabinetmakers," *Antiques* 39 (June 1941): 306-08; Thomas D. Clark, Eleanor Hume Offutt, and Alice Winchester, "Kentucky Furniture," *Antiques* 52 (November 1947): 358-63; chapters eight and nine, "Kentucky Crafts and Craftsmen" (83-90) and "Bluegrass Painters, Sculptors, and Decorators" (91-106) in Rexford Newcomb, *Architecture in Old Kentucky* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1953); Edna Talbot Whitley, "Some Early Cabinet Makers," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 49 (October 1951): 337-48 and 50 (April 1952): 130-33; Mary James Leach, "Josiah . . . and Other Kentucky Cabinet Makers," *Antiques* 65 (February 1954): 138-39; E. T. Whitley, "More Kentucky Cabinet Makers," *Antiques* 66 (December 1954): 485; Clay Lancaster, *Ante Bellum Houses of the Bluegrass* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1961), 26-29; E. T. Whitley, *A Checklist of Kentucky Cabinetmakers From 1775*

to 1859 (Paris, Kentucky: E. T. Whitley, 1970; 2nd ed. 1982); "Silversmiths" (168-69) and "Cabinetmaking" (170-71) in J. Winston Coleman, Jr., ed., *Kentucky: A Pictorial History* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1971); Mary Clay McClinton, "Robert Wilson, Kentucky Cabinetmaker," *Antiques* 103 (May 1973): 945-49; James L. Cogar, "Collecting Antiques in Kentucky Fifty Years Ago," *Antiques* 105 (March 1974): 561-69; William Barrow Floyd, "Kentucky Coin Silver Pitchers," *Antiques* 105 (March 1974): 576-80; Henry H. Harned, "Ante-bellum Kentucky Silver," *Antiques* 105 (April 1974): 818-24; Lois L. Olcott, "Kentucky Federal Furniture," *Antiques* 105 (April 1974): 870-82; Keith N. Morgan, "Josiah Reconsidered: A Green County School of Inlay Cabinetmaking," *Antiques* 105 (April 1974): 883-93; *Antiques in Kentucky* (Frankfort, Kentucky: National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, n.d.) contains in one source the articles above by J. L. Cogar, W. B. Floyd, H. H. Harned, L. L. Olcott, and Keith N. Morgan; *Kentucky Furniture: An Exhibition* (Louisville: J. B. Speed Art Museum, 1974); "Hurricane Hall," *Historic Houses of the South* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 40-47.

²Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, and Co., 1826), 133; Thomas Ashe, *Travels in America Performed in 1806* (London: William Sawyer and Co., 1808), 192.

³*Niles Weekly Register* 7 (1815): 339-40, quoted in J. Winston Coleman, "Lexington As Seen By Travellers, 1810-1835," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 29 (July 1955): 271.

⁴Flint, *Recollections*, 67.

⁵Hunt-Morgan Papers, Special Collections Department, University of Kentucky Libraries.

⁶*Kentucky Gazette*, 13 March 1809, 24 October 1809, 13 February 1810, and 3 April 1810.

⁷*Kentucky Gazette*, 27 July 1813.

⁸*Independent Gazeteer*, 16 November 1805, published in Lexington by T. Anderson.

⁹*Kentucky Gazette*, 7 May 1802 and Charles R. Staples, *The History of Pioneer Lexington (Kentucky) 1779-1806* (Lexington: Transylvania Press, 1939; rpt. Lexington: Lexington-Fayette County Historic Commission, 1973), 178.

¹⁰*Kentucky Gazette and General Adviser*, 13 March 1815.

¹¹See Lancaster, *Ante Bellum Houses*, 26 and Beatrice St. Julien Ravenel, *Architects of Charleston* (2nd ed. Columbia, South Carolina: The R. L. Bryan Co., 1964), 151-54.

¹²Staples, *History*, 221. The "physiognotrace" was one of a number of devices for reducing silhouettes; others included the Eidograph, the Pasigraph, the Prosopographus, the Proportionometer, and the Profilograph; see David Piper, *Shades: An Essay on English Portrait Silhouettes* (New York: Chilmark Press, 1970) 12.

¹³*Kentucky Gazette*, 13 November 1810.

¹⁴*Kentucky Gazette*, 30 December 1816.

¹⁵Edna Talbot Whitley, *Kentucky Ante-Bellum Portraiture*, (s. l.: National Society of the Colonial Dames of America, 1956), 636, 643.

¹⁶*Kentucky Gazette*, 6 June 1814; 29 May 1815; see Whitley, *Portraiture*, 691.

¹⁷*Kentucky Gazette*, 30 March 1813; see also E. T. Whitley, "George Beck: An Eighteenth-Century Painter," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 67 (January 1969): 20-36 and also her "Mary Beck and the Female Mind," *Register* 77 (Winter 1979): 15-24.

¹⁸Fayette County Will Book B, 497-98.

¹⁹*Kentucky Gazette*, 27 July 1814.

²⁰*Kentucky Gazette*, 4 June 1805; Staples, *History*, 220-21.

²¹Fayette County Will Book D, 243 and 125.

²²Fayette County Will Book B, 497-98 and Will Book 1, 414.

²³*Kentucky Gazette*, 26 September 1789; Staples, *History*, 63.

²⁴*Kentucky Gazette*, 26 March 1796.

²⁵*The Philadelphia Directory for 1793*, 59 (Henry F. duPont Winterthur Museum, Joseph Downs Manuscript Library).

²⁶*Kentucky Gazette*, 6 January 1806; Staples, *History*, 236.

²⁷*The Kentucky Reporter*, 13 April 1813; *Kentucky Gazette*, 8 June 1813 and 28 August 1815. The numerous silversmiths of Fayette County have been enumerated in Noble and Lucy Hiatt, *The Silversmiths of Kentucky; Together With Some Watchmakers and Jewelers, 1785-1850* (Louisville, Kentucky: Standard Printing Co., 1954) and more recently in Marquis Boultinghouse, *Silversmiths, Jewelers, Clock and Watch Makers of Kentucky 1785-1900* ([Lexington]: The Author, 1980). For information on Woodruff see Boultinghouse, *Silversmiths*, 288-91 and for David A. Sayre, 232-37.

²⁸*The Reporter*, 14 October 1809.

²⁹Fayette County Will Book B, 21-22.

³⁰*Kentucky Gazette*, 13 October 1810.

³¹Fayette County Will Book B, 21-22 and 95-97.

³²Fayette County Will Book B, 472 and 497-98.

³³Fayette County Will Book B, 497-98.

³⁴Fayette County Will Book B, 472. A "gilly glass" relates to the system of fluid measure; a gill is four fluid ounces, with four gills making a pint.

³⁵Fayette County Will Book B, 95-97.

³⁶Fayette County Will Book B, 204, 243.

³⁷Fayette County Will Book I, 228.

³⁸Fayette County Will Book I, 415.

³⁹*Kentucky Gazette*, 26 December 1805 and Staples, *History*, 226.

⁴⁰*Kentucky Gazette*, 4 July 1814.

⁴¹Mrs. L. Delmar Swan, "Notes On—And In—Pianofortes," *Winterthur Newsletter* 17 (October 1971): 4-5. For further information on Lexington's early piano manufacturers see Joy Carden, *Music in Lexington Before 1840* (Lexington: Lexington-Fayette County Historic Commission, 1980).

⁴²*Kentucky Gazette*, 2 December 1816.

⁴³Fayette County Will Book S, 361.

⁴⁴Fayette County Will Book I, 73-78.

- ⁴⁵Fayette County Will Book I, 58-59.
- ⁴⁶Fayette County Will Book B, 472.
- ⁴⁷Fayette County Will Book B, 497-98.
- ⁴⁸*Kentucky Gazette*, 9 May 1809.
- ⁴⁹Jacqueline P. Bull and Frances L. S. Dugan, eds., *Bluegrass Craftsman: Being The Reminiscences of Ebenezer Hiram Stedman, Papermaker 1808-1885* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1959), 14.
- ⁵⁰Fayette County Will Book B, 21-22; 336; 497-98; 472.
- ⁵¹Fayette County Will Book B, 125, 445.
- ⁵²Fayette County Will Book, 95-97; 497-98.
- ⁵³*The Reporter*, 18 March 1809. When Judge Charles Kerr, for example, describes the Phoenix Tavern of Capt. John Postlethwaite, he writes, "Much of the furniture was made by local cabinet workers, of native cherry and walnut, which was fine and glossy, and the comfort of the corded four-post beds and the beauty of the Windsor chairs were mentioned by more than one writer of the times" (*History of Kentucky* [Chicago: American Historical Society, 1922], 2: 1192).
- ⁵⁴Fayette County Will Book S, 361.
- ⁵⁵Kentucky Historical Society (Frankfort, Kentucky), Inventory and Appraisal of the Estate of David Leitch (8 November 1794), MSS collection No. 533, 1 folder; Fayette County Will Book A, 263 (S. McCrosky); Fayette County Will Book B, 93 (W. Parrish), 125 (B. Welsh), 107 (J. Curry), 243 (H. Meglove).
- ⁵⁶J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *Lexington's First City Directory* (Lexington, Kentucky: Winburn Press, 1953), 1, 5-18.
- ⁵⁷*Kentucky Gazette and Advertiser*, 3 October 1809.
- ⁵⁸Fayette County Court, Record Book, July 1813, 492.
- ⁵⁹*Kentucky Gazette*, 26 February 1816.
- ⁶⁰*The Papers of Henry Clay*, ed. James F. Hopkins and Mary W. M. Hargreaves, 2 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1959): 281, 635.
- ⁶¹Fayette County Will Book I, 469.
- ⁶²*History of Fayette County*, ed. William Henry Perrin (Chicago: O. L. Baskin and Co., 1882), 716, 619.
- ⁶³Staples, *History*, 232.
- ⁶⁴Fayette County Court, Order Book 1, 166.
- ⁶⁵*Kentucky Gazette*, 4 April 1809.
- ⁶⁶Fayette County Court, Order Book 1, 82.
- ⁶⁷*Kentucky Gazette*, 25 August 1810.
- ⁶⁸*Kentucky Gazette*, 11 September 1810. A whitesmith was either a finisher or polisher of the blacksmith's work or a tinsmith.
- ⁶⁹*American Statesman*, 23 November 1811 (Ebeling Newspaper Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard College).
- ⁷⁰*Kentucky Gazette*, 18 July 1814.
- ⁷¹*Kentucky Gazette*, 27 July 1813.
- ⁷²Peter, *History of Fayette County*, 656, 710.
- ⁷³*Kentucky Gazette*, 16 March 1795.
- ⁷⁴Staples, *History*, 203.
- ⁷⁵*Kentucky Gazette*, 4 May 1813.

⁷⁶ Staples, *History*, 94.

⁷⁷ *Independent Gazeteer*, 14 June 1805 (Ebeling Newspaper Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard College).

⁷⁸ *Kentucky Gazette*, 17 October 1814.

⁷⁹ Fayette County Will Book B, 12, 113, 221, 228, 295, 486, 492; Will Book I, 236; Will Book M, 170; Will Book N, 414.

⁸⁰ *Kentucky Gazette*, 21 January 1799; Staples, *History*, 149-50.

⁸¹ The piano is at Liberty Hall in Frankfort, Kentucky.

⁸² Ruth Davidson, "Museum Acquisitions," *Antiques* 95 (January 1969): 58. While unlabeled examples are the rule among representatives of early Kentucky cabinet work, Mrs. Whitley documents a chair by Thomas Tradore Burns of Georgetown, Scott County. This specimen bears a printed tag on "light gray-blue paper" (*Checklist . . . With Addendum*, 12). Ruth Davidson comments that many Southern pieces may be found unlabeled today because humidity in the region will have freed small printed paper labels.