

# Lydia's Drawers

A Case for Localism in Chester County Furniture

by wendy a. cooper

Rarely does one find a piece of furniture not only signed by the maker, but also noting where he was from and the date of construction. Even rarer is any inscription on the piece providing the name of the recipient. Might a client have requested this extensive documentation or was it pride of workmanship that compelled the Quaker joiner Samuel Morris (d. 1809) to sign the back of a drawer with the large and legible pencil inscription "Samuel Morris / Joyner of Logtown / 8 mo 5 1793"? Though this commanding walnut tall chest on frame (Fig. 1) and the inscription (Fig. 2) were published in 1966 by Margaret Berwind Schiffer,<sup>1</sup> it was not until Winterthur was about to acquire the piece in 2007 that the large notation "For Lydia Harlan" was seen on the inside of the backboard of the same drawer (Fig. 2a).

As Winterthur curators work on the forthcoming exhibition *Paint, Pattern, and People: Furniture of Southeastern Pennsylvania, 1725–1850*,<sup>2</sup> they are particularly focused on locating firmly documented pieces like the Morris-Harlan chest on frame, as well as identifying specific localisms of form and ornament. Hence this object is of special interest. Though the chest portion echoes the ubiquitous southeastern Pennsylvania tall chest with an arrangement of either three drawers over two over four long drawers, or three over five long drawers, the frame and the distinctive shaping of the skirt is the distin-



**Fig. 1:** Tall chest on frame, made by Samuel Morris (d. 1809), Chester County or Delaware County, 1793. Black walnut and tulipwood. Winterthur Museum; museum purchase with funds from the Collectors' Circle 2007.17.

guishing feature.<sup>3</sup> Presently six other chest on frames with identical front skirts are known, and two of them are signed and dated 1785 and 1789 respectively by a cabinetmaker named Virgil Eachus (d.1839).<sup>4</sup> To date little is known of Eachus' background, including with whom and where he apprenticed. However, it is noted that in 1791 he married Bathsheba Webb at St. Michael's and Zion Church in Philadelphia, so possibly he apprenticed and began his career in the city.<sup>5</sup>

So who was Samuel Morris? Where did he learn his trade (and how to make those particularly fine trifid feet), and what might have been his association with Eachus? Morris told us he was a "joyner of Logtown" in the inscription, and the way he wrote the date suggests that he was most likely a Quaker.<sup>6</sup> Research has indicated that there were two communities called Logtown: present day Chester Heights in Delaware County and Hamorton in Kennett Township, Chester County, both in Pennsylvania. Further investigation will hopefully clarify where Morris was working in 1793.

Judging from his will of August 1809, written in Kennett Township, it is clear that Morris had connections in Philadelphia since it was noted that in the previous March he had "sold a Certain house and Lot Scituate on Second Street and an Ally known by the name of Stampers Ally in the City of Philadelphia to Robert Blackwell a Church minister of the same place...."<sup>7</sup> Morris' use of full dustboards between the drawers in the Harlan chest on frame suggests that he was familiar with Philadelphia workmanship, and it is possible that he and Eachus worked in the same shop in Philadelphia and continued to work together as they moved out of the city to an adjacent county.

Finally, what is known of Lydia Harlan, the owner of Winterthur's chest on frame? Like Morris, she was a Quaker. Born in 1763, she died in Kennett Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania, in 1825. At the time of her death, she was a maiden lady living in her brother's house with his widow. Her will and



THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:

Fig. 2: Inscription on the back of the second drawer from bottom. "Samuel Morris / Joyner of Logtown / 8 mo 5 1793."

Fig. 2a: Inscription on the inside back of the second drawer from the bottom. "For Lydia Harlan."

inventory indicate that her material possessions were minimal, just a bedroom of furniture, including a "case drawers."<sup>8</sup> However, she had significant resources in bonds and interest due, and the final item in her will, and a further indication of her wealth, noted "I give and bequeath to my niece Lydia Harlan daughter of Israel Harlan my six silver tea spoons marked with the initials L. H. and my riding whip."

As a complete examination of the other six chest on frames occurs, and research continues on the group of individuals associated with them, hopefully more of the connections among and lives of these craftsmen will be revealed. By the time of the exhibition in spring of 2011, it is hoped that many of these mysteries will be solved. For more information on the research project or to discuss possible leads, please e-mail [sepafurnproj@winterthur.org](mailto:sepafurnproj@winterthur.org). @

**Wendy A. Cooper** is the Lois F. and Henry S. McNeil Senior Curator of

*Furniture, Winterthur Museum & Gardens, Winterthur, Delaware.*

*Photography by Laszlo Bodo.*

1. Margaret Berwind Schiffer, *Furniture and its Makers of Chester County, Pennsylvania* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966), figs. 79 & 80.
2. Wendy A. Cooper and assistant curator of furniture Lisa Minardi are preparing a major exhibition and accompanying publication that will be presented at Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware, from April through December 2011.
3. The form of the chest on frame may have some Irish influence since this was a form particularly favored by the Irish and quite a number of the Quakers in southern Chester County were of Irish descent.
4. For the Eachus piece dated 1785, see Schiffer, 74–5, and figs. 37 & 38.
5. Notes from Eachus Genealogy binders at The Chester County Historical Society compiled by Bart Anderson.
6. The way Morris noted the date, i.e. "8 mo 5 1793" is typical of Quaker manuscripts.
7. Chester County Archives, Wills and Administrations, #5574. I thank Nicole Belolan, Winterthur Fellow 2009, for assistance with this research.
8. Chester County Archives, Wills and Administrations, #7725. I thank Jim Guthrie for originally finding this citation.