

CRAFT & COMMERCE IN THE EARLY DELAWARE RIVER VALLEY BY JACKIE KILLIAN

The Delaware River flows 419 miles south from its source in the Catskill Mountains of New York to the Delaware Bay, just north of Cape May, New Jersey. A 1757 map by Thomas Kitchin illustrates the interconnectedness of the landscape that 17th- and 18th-century settlers to the area experienced. Abundant natural resources and navigable rivers made the colony of West New Jersey (founded 1676) a destination for many. The waterways were an integral part of New Jersey's successful timber trade and provided the means for its craftsman to be mobile within, and between, colonies in the Delaware River Valley.

Flanking the cartouche on Kitchin's map are tall trees with high canopies, an allusion to the abundant stands of hard pine, Atlantic white cedar, oak, and chestnut that were early transatlantic commodities. A 1698 tract describing the conditions of the colony cited "a great plenty of working timber; as oaks, ash, chestnuts, pine, cedar, walnut, poplar, fir, and masts for ships, with pitch and pine resin, of great use and much benefit." In particular, cedar's low density and rot-resistance were beneficial for maritime uses and also made it a favored wood in house carpentry for structural timbers and roof shingles.¹



Collectors of early furniture made in the Delaware River Valley recognize the pale, straw-color cedar boards used as drawer bottoms in case pieces made from the late 17th century onward. Gabriel Thomas's 1698 account of West New Jersey enumerates cedars among the species exported to Philadelphia: "Timber-River, alias Gloucester River, which hath its name (also) from the great quantity of curious Timber, which they send in great float to Philadelphia, . . . as Oaks, Pines, Chestnut, Ash, and Cedars." Cedar transported to Philadelphia was then re-exported westward to Chester County and appears in the 1737 inventory of cabinetmaker Joseph Hibberd, which lists "some split cedar for drayor bottomes," contradicting the belief that only Philadelphia cabinetmakers used cedar for such purposes.²

Inland waterways as well as social and religious networks help account for the movements of two early Quaker craftsmen—William Beake(s) III and Seth Pancoast, a joiner and cabinetmaker—who sought economic prosperity on both sides of the Delaware River.



William Beakes III, chest of drawers, walnut, ca. 1715. *Rocky Hill Collection*

William Beake III (1696–1761), born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, to the son of a yeoman and member of the Society of Friends, trained in Philadelphia under joiner William Till, who died in 1711, the year Beake’s apprenticeship likely concluded. The joined chest of drawers signed by Beake is one of three nearly identical chests from his hand, made possibly during his time in Philadelphia or after he relocated to New Jersey. By 1748 Beake was a permanent resident of Monmouth County and was among a list of the colony’s freeholders. In his will, recorded in Upper Freehold in 1761, he identified himself as a joiner, indicating continued activity in the trade, unlike so many craftsmen who became yeoman and retired from their physically demanding craft earlier in life.³

Seth Pancoast (b. 1718), the cabinetmaker whose signed high chest of drawers dates to 1766 (fig. 3) and to whom a companion dressing table also in figured maple is attributed, came from a family of carpenters. His grandfather, John (Panckhurst), emigrated from Northampton, England, to Mansfield Township, Burlington County, New Jersey, in 1680. Upon his death, John willed his “carpentures tools” to sons William (Seth’s father) and Joseph. It is possible that Seth apprenticed in Mansfield or Burlington or in Chester County, Pennsylvania, with his eldest brother, William, who had married Mary Copeland in 1730 under the oversight of the Chester Friends Meeting. Seth no doubt was successful in the Marple Township area (now Delaware County), where he settled after marrying Esther Coppock in Chester County in 1741. His refined pieces certainly are the work of a practiced hand.

The definitive reasons for the movements of these Delaware River Valley artisans are not known, but it is probable that economic promise drove them while their social and religious networks made their relocation possible. Their accomplished work helps illustrate the skill of craftsmen practicing their trade outside the urban center of Philadelphia and reminds us that hundreds more did so successfully—their furniture and stories still waiting to be discovered.



Seth Pancoast, high chest of drawers, figured maple, 1766. *Winterthur Museum, promised gift of John J. Snyder, Jr. L2010.1042.1*

¹ Gabriel Thomas, “An Historical and Geographical Account of the Province and Country of West-New-Jersey in America, 1698,” in *Original Narratives of Early American History: Narratives of Early Pennsylvania, West New Jersey, and Delaware, 1630 1707*, ed. Albert Cook Myers (New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1912), 349. For more on the early use of cedar shingles, see Theodore Maisch, “Episodes in the Lumber Industry,” *Southern Lumberman* 136, no. 1760 (July 15, 1929): 64–65.

² Thomas, “Historical Account,” 350. Joseph Hibberd, 1737, Inventory #609, Chester County Archives. My thanks to Lisa Minardi for providing a copy of this document.

³ I am grateful to Christopher Storb for sharing his knowledge of Beake’s life and apprenticeship. The three Beake chests are in private hands, including one in the collection of the Dietrich American Foundation.

⁴ For more on Seth Pancoast and the Pancoast family, see Wendy A. Cooper and Lisa Minardi, *Paint, Pattern & People: Furniture of Southeastern Pennsylvania, 1725 1850* (Winterthur, Del.: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 2011), 122–23; and Bennett S. Pancoast, *The Pancoast Family in America* (Woodbury, N.J.: Gloucester County Historical Society, 1981), 1–27.

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