



1985.14.25

Straight front bureau, attributed to John Nash (1759-1835), probably Winchester, 1785-1800

- **Rare example of Connecticut case furniture branded with what is believed to be the maker's name**
- **Unusually elegant and formal bureau in the Chippendale style by a small town joiner (18th-century term for cabinetmaker)**

Brands on furniture, whether by maker or owner, are uncommon in Connecticut except on (Windsor) chairs. Only a handful of examples of branded case furniture (with drawers) are known. Although John Nash is a documented joiner, no branded chairs or other furniture by him have surfaced. The brand could also have been used for cattle or other purposes. The design and construction of the bureau are consistent with Nash's dates and location, so that the attribution to him as cabinetmaker seems reasonable. Early ownership history is unknown. The bureau was bequeathed to CHS by George Hills Gilman, Jr. (1906-1985), a former trustee. According to the object file, it was purchased by the Gilman family in 1923 from (Leon) Stanley Davis (1884-1967) of Lyme, a Colonial Revival furniture craftsman, known for his copies of period furniture. He may well have used this snappy bureau for that purpose. He advertised repeatedly in early issues of *The Magazine Antiques*, as well as the *Hartford Courant* and other local publications. Davis was also proprietor of the "Brick Store," at one time a home for Old Lyme artists and now the site of the Florence Griswold Museum.

The cabinetmaker

John Nash, the presumed maker of the bureau, was born in the West Division of Hartford, now West Hartford, and probably apprenticed nearby. About 1782 he married in Torrington before moving to Winchester where he remained for the rest of his life. Boyd's *Annals of Winchester* documents his occupation. Another John Nash advertised from Newtown as a cabinetmaker in the Bridgeport *Republican Farmer* on November 16, 1825. He is probably the John Nash who was born in Redding in 1802 and married in 1831. Both are listed in the 1830 census. The Newtown Nash is almost certainly too young to have made this bureau. Further details about his life and career are unavailable. The design and construction of the bureau strongly support a maker with Hartford County origins.

Design

The bureau's design is in keeping with regional late 18th-century practice. It features several frills that would have added to the cost for the buyer:

- Top board with molded edge and a small cornice below
- Complex inset quarter columns at the front corners
- A finely carved "gadroon" strip between the front feet
- Splayed (outward raking) ogee feet

Construction

The construction details of the bureau also largely follow Hartford County practice. Backboards are inserted into grooves in the case sides. The front feet are joined together with "blind" (invisible from the outside) dovetails. The top is attached with a "sliding dovetail" (visible from the rear), a method usually associated with bureaus made in Massachusetts. The brand "J. NASH" is located on the outside of the backboard. Primary (exterior) wood is cherry; secondary (interior) woods are white pine and tulip poplar. There are no major restorations. The brasses are appropriate replacements.

Related examples

A privately owned straight front bureau is similarly branded by the Windham Windsor chairmaker Amos Denison Allen (1774-1855). CHS at one time owned a bureau branded "J. WELLS," then attributed to the Hartford cabinetmaker John I. Wells (1769-1832) but now believed to have been branded by an owner from Massachusetts or New Hampshire. It has since been deaccessioned.

Reference

Thomas P. Kugelman et al., *Connecticut Valley Furniture: Eliphalet Chapin and His Contemporaries, 1750-1800* (CHS, 2005), pp. 352-353

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