



Figure 1. Charles Warner's stenciled label, c. 1830, located inside the drawer bottom of a mahogany Pembroke table. Private collection.



Figures 2 & 3. Mahogany Pembroke table, c. 1830, bearing the stenciled label of Charles Warner. Private collection.



# A Regional Study in Early Nineteenth-century Cabinetmaking: Charles Warner, Cabinetmaker, Poughkeepsie, New York

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## ABSTRACT

This paper will examine cabinetmaking in upstate New York using primary research on a newly discovered nineteenth-century cabinetmaker. I will provide a biographical sketch of the Poughkeepsie, New York cabinetmaker Charles Warner in the sociological and chronological context in which he worked.

The necessary background material will be provided to define Poughkeepsie geographically, politically, and economically in the first half of the nineteenth century. The development of new routes of transportation and trade will be discussed. Insights into the economic development within the region that encouraged the production of furniture and objects to be marketed to an emerging middle class will be outlined.

During the discussion, it will be suggested that an expanding economic climate, new modes of river transportation, and an increasing availability of a skilled workforce had developed in Poughkeepsie. This development was substantial enough to support the trade of fine cabinetmaking, and allowed a newly emerging middle class to emulate the styles and tastes favored in more urban settings.

## INTRODUCTION

I located a mahogany Pembroke table bearing the stenciled label inside the drawer bottom, “Charles Warner, Cabinetmaker, Poughkeepsie,” in the Dutchess County, New York area (fig. 1). My initial investigations into studies documenting cabinetmaking in upstate New York during the first half of the nineteenth century revealed no published documentation of Charles Warner’s work. The first published link to Warner I found was through David Hewett, an editor for *The Maine Antiques Digest*, who has compiled a large database of American cabinetmakers. Warner was named in this database as having worked as a cabinetmaker in Poughkeepsie around 1820. I then found a second reference in the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) index, which was generated from a mention in the *Washington Gazette* dated September 25, 1820, of a fire in the shop of cabinetmaker Charles Warner. In addition to such little information regarding Warner, I found, overall, there was a distinct lack of scholarship in the furniture history of this time period and region.

While there are many celebrated and well-documented early nineteenth-century cabinetmakers in New York City, such as Charles-Honoré Lannuier, Duncan Phyfe, and Joseph Meeks, they were making high-style furniture in an urban environment. John Scherer’s book, *New York Furniture at the New York State Museum*, published in 1979, contains labeled examples of upstate New York furniture, but is more of a survey than a focused study on a single cabinetmaker. When we look closer at the region of upstate New York, we find a lack of published literature on the subject of early nineteenth-century cabinetmaking.

During the first and second quarter of the nineteenth century, populations and commerce in small cities like Poughkeepsie grew rapidly, and cabinetmakers began producing goods for the newly emerging middle class. The Pembroke table made by Warner is clear evidence of this type of work.

Since there were very few initial pieces of substantive evidence documenting Charles Warner's existence as a cabinetmaker, I began to piece together research from a variety of primary biographical sources to gain further insight into his life and work. He is listed in the records of the Poughkeepsie Rural Cemetery as having died on September 25th, 1834, at the age of 44. It was common practice for the cabinetmakers of the period to undertake a lengthy and often unpaid apprenticeship and to become a journeyman at the age of 21. Therefore, the most likely records of Warner's life and work would be found in the time period beginning in 1810 and ending with his death in 1834.

### **POUGHKEEPSIE IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY**

Originally settled by the Dutch in 1735, Poughkeepsie is on the east bank of the Hudson River, 74 miles north of New York City and 75 miles south of Albany. By the time the Village of Poughkeepsie was incorporated in 1801, Dutchess County was a major grain-growing region, and Poughkeepsie was the major point for the transfer of goods, due to its ready access by water to a regional market extending as far north as Albany and as far south as Long Island.

During the early part of the nineteenth century, the freighting industry was well established in Poughkeepsie and reaching a peak. In 1814 the village became a steamboat terminal, the first town between New York and Albany to have this distinction. By this time, Poughkeepsie was well established as a center for commercial traffic for the county. In 1824, Horatio Gates Spafford states in the *Gazetteer of the State of New York* that Poughkeepsie was an "opulent post town" with a population of 5,726.

There were two small rivers, Fall Creek along the north part of the village and Wappingers Creek along the eastern border, which "afford a great profusion of sites for water-works, and render Poughkeepsie an eligible site for manufactures, of various kinds, which also require the mixed population of a populous town" (Spafford 425). There were five landings with wharves and storehouses, and trade was very extensive, with "ten large sloops or packets sailing weekly to New York" (425).

In 1824 the Village of Poughkeepsie had about 600 houses, stores, and shops. There were also county buildings, five churches, meetinghouses, a bank, an academy, a Lancaster school, three cotton factories, three sawmills, two extensive breweries, and a distillery (425). Spafford also writes that in 1820, Poughkeepsie had a population of 5,726, with 553 mechanics, 366 farmers, 110 persons employed in commerce and trade, 93 non-naturalized foreigners, 301 free blacks, and 47 slaves.

These descriptions paint a picture of a rapidly growing economy, with bustling regular trade and commerce routes building the foundations of wealth among the citizens of Poughkeepsie. The commercial goods and fashions available in the closest urban center of influence, New York City, were most certainly desired and emulated by the citizens of Poughkeepsie as a newly prosperous middle class began to emerge.

### **NEW YORK CITY: CENTER OF INFLUENCE**

In order to better understand the state of cabinetmaking in early nineteenth-century Poughkeepsie, we must look to New York City for the origins of taste and style. During this time, New York began to take the lead from Philadelphia in the production of high-style furniture. The city became a shopping capital that rivaled London and Paris, and was called the "Great Emporium." In 1805, the first cabinetmakers' directory was published as part of the *New York City Directory*. In the introduction, the editor remarks about the state of cabinetmaking in New York:



Figure 4. Drawer detail, mahogany Pembroke table, c. 1830, bearing the stenciled label of Charles Warner. Private collection.

“This curious and useful mechanical art is brought to a very great perfection in this city. The furniture daily offered for sale equals, in point and elegance, any ever imported from Europe, and is scarcely equaled in any other city in America.”

Spafford writes in 1824 that the seaport of New York “stands unrivaled in these states” in the vast commerce carried out there, with “its thousands of ships, brigs, schooners, and sloops” that are traveling to and from “all parts of the world.” These new modes of transportation were rapidly increasing the market available to cabinetmakers, and this market was soon to expand even further.

### THE ERIE CANAL

After eight years of construction, the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, linking the waters of New York Harbor and the Hudson River in the east with Lake Erie in the west. This development cemented the port of New York City as the geographical and financial center of a web of national and international commerce. The Erie Canal facilitated the development of cities along its route, such as Poughkeepsie, Albany, Troy, Utica, Rochester, and Buffalo, and also provided the means to transport

furniture from New York City to the interior of the state. Because Poughkeepsie is directly on the Hudson River and along this trade route, logic follows that the trends in cabinetmaking brought from New York City influenced local cabinetmakers, who would lend their own interpretations to the more formal styles popularized by New York makers.

### A MAHOGANY PEMBROKE TABLE

The one physical artifact I found documenting the work of Charles Warner is a mahogany Pembroke table, probably dating to 1820-30, bearing his stenciled label (fig. 1 & 2). The table is in a private collection in Poughkeepsie. The table is made of high quality figured mahogany on the top, with rule-jointed D-shaped drop leaves and book-matched mahogany veneers on the drawer fronts (fig. 3). The table has one drawer and a corresponding “false” drawer front. The secondary woods are poplar and eastern white pine (fig. 4). The table exhibits both the Sheraton and Empire influences in the treatment of the spiral-turned, classical carved legs, with bulbous ring turnings ending in brass cup castors (fig. 5). The stamped brass drawer knobs and brass cup castors appear to be later replacements (fig. 6).

The Warner table exhibits some residual similarities to an earlier Pembroke table made by George Woodruff in New York City in 1808-10, now in the collection of the Winterthur Museum in Delaware. Woodruff’s Pembroke table has the earlier turned and reeded legs so often seen on New York furniture of the period, ending in gracefully bulbous ring turnings with cup castors, as opposed to the heavier, spiral-turned, classical carved legs seen on the Warner table. The trend toward classical acanthus or waterleaf carvings can be seen on a wide range of New York furniture of the period.



Figure 5. Classical carving detail. Mahogany Pembroke table, c. 1830, bearing the stenciled label of Charles Warner. Private collection.

### PRIMARY RESEARCH

In order to provide a more complete picture of Warner's biography, I examined a variety of primary sources. The Dutchess County Courthouse holds the Surrogate's Court records dating back to the early eighteenth century, and I located Charles Warner's estate inventory there. There were several newspapers in the period, including *The Independence*, the *Poughkeepsie Eagle*, the *Poughkeepsie Journal*, and the *Poughkeepsie Telegraph*, in which I searched for advertisements or announcements regarding Warner.

I researched the birth, marriage, and death certificates, as well as mortgages and deeds for the Warner family, at both the County Clerk's office in Poughkeepsie and the Dutchess County Historical

Society. The federal census records, which began in 1790 and were taken every ten years, and the New York State census, which was conducted five years apart from the federal records, provided further information, as did city and county directories. I was successful in finding many important documents pertaining to Warner and have been able to assemble facts that cast a light on some of the details of his life, business dealings, and the Warner family.

### THE WARNER FAMILY

My research revealed that Thomas Warner was most likely the father of Charles Warner, and records show he was married to Alida Warner. In 1785, Thomas Warner purchased a lot in Poughkeepsie "beginning at the northeast corner of Myndert Van Kleek's garden fence along the new street." (Platt 67) Obituary records show that on August 16, 1815, Thomas Warner died in Poughkeepsie at age 57. Rebecca Warner, "Daughter of Thomas Warner" made an announcement in the *Poughkeepsie Telegraph*.

Thirty-five years later on April 13, 1851, some 17 years after Charles' death, Alida Warner died in Poughkeepsie leaving a will disposing of "her interest in the Poughkeepsie Whaling Company, as left by her son Charles Warner, and her interest in the Dutchess County Bank." She was listed as a pew holder in the Dutchess Church.

A large finding regarding the Warner family was from the Poughkeepsie Rural Cemetery, where family members are buried in a large plot listed as Deed 77 in the cemetery records. Jonathan Rowland Warner of Utica, New York, purchased the plot on December 6, 1856. Cemetery records reveal the members of the Warner family who were interred there, along with the date they died and the date they were interred. Charles Warner is listed in this record as having died in 1834, and was interred there in 1856 (more on this below).

The Records of the First and Second Reformed Dutch Church 1716–1912 show many entries concerning the Warner family. The mentions come



Figure 6. Detail, hardware. Mahogany Pembroke table, c. 1830, bearing the stenciled label of Charles Warner. Private collection.

from the Baptismal Register, 1757–1906, and the Marriage Register, 1765–1906. Although these records document the Warner family quite well, no records of Charles Warner were found here.

### THE DUTCHESS COUNTY SURROGATE'S COURT RECORDS

Some of my most fruitful research came from the Dutchess County Surrogate's Court where I was very fortunate to find Charles Warner's estate inventory file. This file provided key information about his life, including financial statements, identities of family members, a detailed inventory of his shop and home, his stock shares, and a mention of his business partnership, Warner and Nelson. His younger brother, James H. Warner from the Town of Washington, and Charles Swift from Poughkeepsie were appointed administrators of his estate. According to the Surrogate's Court documents, Charles Warner died of cholera without a last will and testament on September 25, 1834, in Utica, New York, while still a resident of

Dutchess County. He died at the home of another younger brother, Jonathan Rowland Warner, who had made a fortune in the fur-trading business. Charles Warner left his mother, Alida Warner, his sisters, Rebecca and Fanny, and his brothers, James H. Warner and Jonathan Rowland Warner, the sum of \$7,000. The Estate of Charles Warner paid \$14,000 to the State of New York. Warner also owned a considerable number of stock shares, including stock in the Poughkeepsie Whaling Company, the Farmers and Manufacturers Bank, the Eastern Market, the Poughkeepsie Steam Boat Company, and the Dutchess Whaling Company. These financial records would indicate that Charles Warner was a successful cabinetmaker and businessman, with considerable financial resources for the period.

In my research I found another mention of Warner in business dealings in Poughkeepsie. The following petition was presented to the Poughkeepsie board of trustees in 1833 and includes the name and signature petitioner Charles Warner:

To The Trustees of the Village of Poughkeepsie:

The Undersigned deeply impressed with the importance of a communication by means of a railroad or canal, from the village of Poughkeepsie to Pine Plains, from thence through a part of Columbia County to the line of Massachusetts, do request the trustees will take immediate measures to have said route examined by a competent and experienced engineer. As this is a subject of such vital importance to the prosperity of this village the undersigned do not entertain a doubt by that the expenditure of any reasonable amount, by the trustees to accomplish the object above, will be sanctioned and approved of by the citizens at large.

This petition illustrates that Charles Warner was a businessman, with ties to the community and concerns for the economic prosperity of the village.

## ESTATE INVENTORY

Warner's estate inventory was quite detailed and well documented. It listed many pieces of furniture, and listed the house and shop inventory separately. One hundred and eighteen pieces of furniture were listed in the inventory of the shop, a substantial holding of furniture. Pieces were listed as being made of mahogany, maple, curled maple, birch, and pine. The shop inventory included: dining tables, sideboards, French beauros [sic], high-post, low-post, and field bedsteads, a bedstead with carved posts, dressing tables, wash stands, clock cases, tea tables, pier tables, a secretary, foot stools, bookcases, benches, and cradles. It is interesting to note that a particular piece was described as "one maple bedstead, not marked." This may indicate a distinction of not being labeled, which suggests that the other pieces were labeled. Although this is only a guess, it gives hope there are other labeled Warner pieces in existence. The only tools listed were one bench and tools valued at twenty-five dollars. The only finishing supplies listed were one lot of beeswax valued at five dollars. Also included were three pieces of baize, the thin cloth often used to cover writing surfaces on desks during the period.

While Warner's house inventory also lists furniture, it includes many personal effects, including one pig, appraised at eight dollars, and a gold watch valued at eighty dollars. The inventory also lists molasses, shad, potatoes, and butter. These items, in addition to his dying in Utica, some 170 miles away, suggest that his death was unexpected as he left food stocks and a pig to tend to.

There is evidence that Warner had a business partner at the time of his death, as the Surrogate's Court documents noted the "supposed interest in the Firm of Warner and Nelson, \$1,270" in the estate inventory. This business was presumably a cabinetmaking shop. Warner also had \$500 of notes owed to him dated July 2, 1834, by his business partner, Richard Nelson, and a note for \$720 owed to him by P&R Nelson. It is unclear who P&R Nelson are, but most likely this is a business

interest involving Richard Nelson. Subsequent research has indicated that Nelson may have carried on the business of cabinetmaking into the second half of the nineteenth century.

## TWO FIRES

There are two documented fires that involved Warner, one directly, and one indirectly just after he died. The first fire, mentioned in the Introduction, occurred sometime in September, 1820 in Warner's shop, and the article in the *Washington Gazette* from September 25th, 1820 reads:

From the *Poughkeepsie Journal*: Fire. Our citizens were alarmed about 10 o'clock yesterday morning by the cry of fire through our streets. The fire proved to be in Mr. Charles Warner's Cabinetmaker's shop, in the rear of the buildings on the south side of Main Street. It is supposed the fire originated from a stove in the shop.

The second fire occurred two years after Warner's death, on May 12, 1836, when "Poughkeepsie was visited by the most extensive fire that has ever been known in this place." (Platt 126) The fire began in the shop of Gorman and Nelson, cabinetmakers, and burned all the buildings on the south side of Main Street. Damages reached fifty thousand dollars, and the Estate of Charles Warner was listed among the building owners. The shop of Gorman and Nelson may represent Warner's prior business partner, Richard Nelson, continuing on with a new partnership.

I found an interesting cross-reference to this fire in "A Workingman's Recollections of America" from *Knights Penny Magazine*. An English cabinetmaker who had been living and working in New York City decided to seek new opportunity by heading north:

I therefore resolved on removing to Poughkeepsie, a town on the banks of the Hudson, about eighty miles above the city, where a large fire having just before burnt down two

cabinet-making establishments, where it was reasonable to hope that work would be readily obtained.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the early nineteenth century, the city and port of New York rose to a nationally dominant socio-economic position. As new modes and routes of water transportation developed, including the advent of steamships and the Erie Canal, upstate regions that were once geographically isolated became viable places for economic expansion. This growth carried with it the development of a new middle and expanded skilled working class; Poughkeepsie began to shift from what had been primarily an agricultural economy to a rapidly urbanizing and industrializing economy. This development was substantial enough to support the trade of fine cabinetmaking, and allowed an emerging middle class the opportunity to emulate the styles and tastes developed in more urban settings.

As for Charles Warner himself, one of the most puzzling aspects of this study is the lack of birth records for Charles Warner and the fact that he is not listed in any of the baptismal records with the other children of Thomas and Alida Warner. He died at the Utica home of Jonathan Rowland Warner, is buried in the Warner family plot in the Poughkeepsie Rural Cemetery, and is mentioned in the will of Alida Warner. Yet, his early origins remain unclear. This may indicate he was adopted or came to the Warner family through a distant relative.

This study raised a number of areas that need further study. Research on the names of the other cabinetmakers mentioned in the Warner business dealings could further clarify his dealings with other craftsman. More research could also be done on the cabinetmaker Richard Nelson and the later firm of J.P. Nelson, who is mentioned in the cabinetmaking chapter of the book *Natives and Newcomers* by Clyde and Sally Griffen.

It is my hope that this work will pave the way for further research on the subject of cabinetmaking in upstate New York during the first half of the nineteenth century.

In an exciting and interesting postscript to this story, a private collector has put together a substantial, newly-discovered group of labeled Charles Warner furniture, which is now in the author's conservation lab being examined prior to conservation treatment. I plan to present the findings from this new study at a future annual WAG meeting as a follow-up to this paper.

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