

Furnishings of the Black Mansion 1827-1928

Tom Johnson, CURATOR, Old York Historical Society & CHAIRMAN, Woodlawn Museum Professional Advisory Committee

When John Black built his mansion in 1827, it was undoubtedly conceived as a whole, complete with its furnishings. In September of that year he and his wife, Mary Cobb Black, traveled to Boston to make purchases for their new home. Bills of sale in the Black Family Archives show that they spent a total of \$634.79 on furniture – \$438.80 at the Boston Furniture Warehouse and \$195.99 at Samuel Beal's Furniture Warehouse. To understand the significance of this outlay, consider this: in 1827 a skilled laborer in Portland made \$1.00 a day, so \$634.79 would equal almost *two years' wages* at that level. Today, a skilled laborer in Portland may make \$240.00 a day [*@ \$30.00/hr*], so by extrapolation one can calculate that *the approximate equal value outlay today* would be \$152,349.60. This is not a direct conversion based on inflation and other factors affecting the value of our currency, but rather it is a comparison between the relative value of earnings then versus now, and what it would take to purchase similar quantities and quality today.

During that same trip, John and Mary Black also purchased \$249.69 worth of carpeting, rugs, underlayment and bindings, and spent \$181.00 for silver, silver plate, bronze lamps, and Britannia metal. It is evident from these first purchases that the Blacks were out to furnish their new home in the finest contemporary taste, and they must have admirably succeeded in this aim. Looking at it in financial terms, John Black's expenditures during the three day shopping spree in Boston cost the equivalent of a bit over a quarter million dollars in relative value today.

The single most expensive furniture item bought in September of 1827 was the dining room sideboard (*figure 1*), which cost \$45.00 (\$10,800.00 today). Made of mahogany with pine secondary, it is a fine example of

Boston classical furniture of the late 1820s. Much of the silver on top of this piece is listed on the September 24, 1827 bill, and the carpeting was also purchased at that time. Looking at this vignette in the mansion today one sees a basically unchanged statement of John and Mary Black's taste for their new home. Other pieces currently on view at the Woodlawn Museum appear to have been acquired

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Figure 1. Sideboard, Boston, 1826-27. Part of the original purchase of furnishings for Woodlawn by John and Mary Black in September of 1827.



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2004: Celebrating the Past While Planning for the Future

The year 2004 has been full of great strides at Woodlawn Museum. We have expanded our educational outreach, begun the long-anticipated restoration of the main house, made our collections more accessible for scholars while ensuring their protection well into the future, and we have continued to hold numerous special events for the community. This has been accomplished in large part because of your generosity of time, talent, and financial contributions. Thank you for making a difference at Woodlawn.

This year, we have taken significant steps to expand our educational outreach, including the development of our exciting Historic Game Library for area children (and fun loving adults). If you have not had a chance to play and learn from our games, please do so. We were also pleased to develop a special lecture and tour series. Noted experts Earle Shettleworth, Laura Sprague, and Tom Johnson provided insightful and interesting presentations on their research into the Woodlawn collections. We also offered three very informative garden lectures, in conjunction with the Hancock County Extension Office, as an aspect of our successful community garden program.

Perhaps most exciting, was to see preservation work begin at Woodlawn. Under the watchful guidance of our Buildings and Grounds Committee, I am pleased to announce that ¼ of the main house has been preserved. The entire mansion has been re-pointed and both the sun porch and bathroom ells (on the rear of the house) have been fully restored. To date, the preservation campaign has raised over \$372,000. Please visit our website for more information on our campaign.

We also continued our tradition of offering top quality, family oriented special events. These events, the Easter Egg Hunt, the Living History Day, Appraisal Day, Autumn Festival, and our Afternoon Teas were outstanding offerings to the community, made possible in part by generous financial underwriting from local businesses and by the time and talent of countless volunteers. Thank you to all who made them so successful. Don't miss our last special event of the year, *Candlelight Evening*, which will be held on December 11th.

The 75th Anniversary Gala Celebration was the highlight of the summer season, raising \$7,500 for preservation work. With Governor Baldacci leading the way, not only did we celebrate 75 years of excellence, but also the contributions of hundreds of people who have ensured Woodlawn's special place in this region.

Now, as we plan the further expansion of our programs, I ask for your help again. Your gift of time, talent, and generous financial contributions to our Annual Appeal will ensure that Woodlawn's place as Maine's premier historic estate and outstanding community resource will continue for many years to come.

Thank you for your support and I look forward to seeing you at Woodlawn.



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Furnishings... (continued from page 1)



Figure 2. Dining table, one of a pair, Boston, 1826-1827.

during the 1827 shopping trip. A set of “match [sic] dining tables” (figure 2) purchased for the dining room cost \$50.00, and pair of “Grecian” card tables, well documented on the bill at \$38.00, were probably intended for either the drawing or dining room, but are now seen in the lower traverse hall and in the upstairs master bedroom.

Other pieces identifiable in the mansion today that are listed on the initial bills are a set of “6 light fancy chairs” and a set of twelve other fancy chairs with somewhat more elaborate gilt decoration. Manufactured much like these chairs, in “turning factories” of the period, the Blacks also included two mantle glasses in their purchases (figure 3), probably intended for above the marble mantles at either end of the great twin drawing rooms. All these items are excellent examples of conservative Boston classical furniture at its finest.



Figure 3. Overmantle looking glass, Boston, 1826-1827.



Figure 4. Bedstead and bedding, Boston, 1826-1827.

Although the majority of these initial purchases were intended for the formal public rooms of the house, the upper chambers were by no means ignored when it came to luxurious appointments. The widely recognized and much admired bedstead in the principal bed chamber (figure 4) is undoubtedly the “mahogany high post bedstead” listed at \$26.00 on the 1827 bill, along with a somewhat plainer version at \$18.00 that survives in a secondary bed chamber. Both retain their original dimity hangings. These bedsteads were originally fitted with feather ticks and bolsters. One of the Blacks purchases during that September shopping spree in 1827 was 96 pounds of “best live geese feathers” costing \$42.24 (\$10,137.60 in current value), roughly equal to what the two mahogany bedsteads had cost themselves. Also on the beds were “2 bed ticks” (probably compressed hay to serve as a base for the subsequent mattresses and feather ticks), and “2 large mattresses” which, at the time would have been understood to be curled horsehair. Make no doubt about it, these were *luxurious* beds, and with



Figure 5. Barrel back chair, possibly Boston, circa 1800. Formerly owned by General David Cobb.

the attendant hangings, would have easily been the most expensive objects in the house.

Mary Cobb Black's father, General David Cobb, died in 1830, and it is probably through inheritance that a number of pieces came to the house with a Cobb provenance. Many of the finer colonial and federal era furnishings at Woodlawn today are believed to have been owned by the General. Their addition to the house began a process that continued throughout the nineteenth century of creating interiors that evoked an "ancestral mansion."

Perhaps the most interesting Cobb piece is a large barrel-back chair in the library (figure 5) probably used by General Cobb while Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives. In form and construction, it greatly resembles chairs made for the House of Representatives by Benjamin Frothingham, circa 1800. The library also contains Boston or North Shore Massachusetts Chippendale style dining chairs circa 1760-1780 that belonged to Cobb. Of special note is a *bureau à cylindre* of the Louis XVI era (figure 6), circa 1785-1793. By tradition, this piece was also owned by General Cobb. Much work remains to be done on this desk to ascertain its origins, but Cobb was acquainted with James Swan of Boston (and Swans Island, Maine), an American who shipped back prodigious amounts of French furniture purchased at palace contents sales after the French Revolution in 1792. Many of Swan's pieces are at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston now, but Swan was also generous in selling pieces to his friends. Is

this one of those pieces? We don't know at this point, but there is a lot of anecdotal and coincidental information to bolster that provenance. Yet irrespective of its background, this is a small masterpiece, with finely grained mahogany and *bronze doré* mounts. It is palace-quality furniture, and whether or not it started out in a palace in France, it now fits quite handsomely into a room in what was acknowledged when built to be one of the palaces of Maine. It might not be as incongruous as one might think. On the mantle in the same room is a rather marvelous French classical clock of the same period that further links this Maine estate to a greater "world view."

Other pieces that might eventually reveal a Cobb connection are a very nice bowfront Massachusetts Chippendale chest of drawers and a Massachusetts high chest with fan carved center drawer found in the bedchambers. Both of these pieces are of the period and quality that one would expect General Cobb to have owned. They are sufficiently different from later colonial revival



Figure 6. Bureau à cylindre, probably Paris, France or environs, 1785-1793. Formerly owned by General David Cobb.



period purchases, to make one suspect they, too, are of Cobb descent.

Of course there were subsequent purchases of furniture for the house in the nineteenth century. After Mary Cobb Black died in 1851, John Black married again in 1852. This is a time when new furniture may have been introduced into the house. Later, upon the death of John Black in 1856 and his widow, Frances H. Black, in 1874, John's son, George Nixon Black, occupied Woodlawn, using it primarily as a summer house. Among the pieces that may have been brought to Woodlawn from other family households is a grouping of later Boston Classical furniture. A marble top pier table in the parlor, a Boston curule form stool, and an elegant grey marble topped center table top this list.

An interesting piece in the parlor is the small marble topped table (*figure 7*). The base is a classical Boston pedestal which, after alteration in the 19th century, now boasts a replacement *pietra dura* top made of inlaid marble taken from classical ruins. Table tops such as this were purchased as souvenirs by wealthy travelers to Rome, Pompeii, or Herculaneum, and similar examples exist in other American collections. Someone in the family must have taken the Grand Tour of Europe and brought this back with them. Further research in the archives will hopefully reveal its provenance.

When George Nixon Black died in 1880, Woodlawn passed to his son, George Nixon Black, Jr. (1842-1928). A life long bachelor, he lived primarily in Boston and at his second home, "Kraggyde," in Manchester, Massachusetts. George Nixon Black, Jr. revered his grandfather's house. Armed with both taste and money, he set about refining Woodlawn into an American version of an English ancestral seat. Greatly influenced by the colonial revival movement, George acquired predominantly early furniture that he described as "mostly Queen Anne and Georgian" and mixed it in with the inherited furnishings. The rooms, and indeed the whole ambiance of the house today, although strongly rooted in earlier generations, is largely George Jr.'s legacy.

In the dining room and hallway one finds two sets of New England Queen Anne side chairs that he added to the house. Both chair sets retain wonderful mohair plush upholstery that George must have had put on in the 1890s. Some of the earliest things he brought to Woodlawn are American pilgrim century case pieces – a Boston-area chest with carved oak and applied spindle decoration in the hall, and a very important pine chest with two drawers on an integral turned base frame in the office. Although there is restoration



Figure 7. Table base, Boston, 1825-1830, and pietra dura top, probably Rome, 1850-1875.

to one drawer of this piece, it hardly diminishes the rarity and importance of the form in American furniture.

George was not what one would term a connoisseur collector, but rather someone who appreciated the ambiance created by surrounding himself with early American things. That may explain several pieces of large furniture in the house that impart great dignity to their surroundings but are in reality extensively reworked fragments of antique furniture. One such piece is the secretary desk in the office (*figure 8*). Sometime in the 1880s or 1890s a cabinetmaker took either the whole piece, or perhaps only the fragments of a piece, and reworked them into the object that exists today. Verifiable original eighteenth century components include the lower desk carcass, its four drawers, and the upper bookcase section from the pediment down. Late nineteenth century additions include all four ball and claw carved feet, the center pendant drop, and the entire pediment and finials. The entire interior of the writing compartment is replaced, and the slant lid is even questionable. The wonderfully figured mahogany panels on the upper doors might be
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Woodlawn Museum's 75th Anniversary

“I want to welcome you all and thank you for being here this evening to help as the Board of Trustees and staff celebrates the 75th birthday of the Woodlawn Museum.

It is because of the love and effort of many of you and countless others that John Black's magnificent estate, bequeathed to the public by his grandson George Nixon Black Jr., has enjoyed a remarkable 75 year history as one of Maine's and perhaps the nation's most important historic properties.

I am ever mindful that this unique community asset was the result of a gift and has survived and prospered due to the continuous stream of gifts of time, talent and treasure given by literally hundreds of people like you, who have understood the value this asset brings to Downeast Maine.

What better way to show our appreciation to all of them than to gather here today to celebrate the fruits of their gifts and to cut the ribbon on the next 75 years?

On August 20, 1929 Maine's governor, William Tudor Gardner, demonstrated that he understood the importance of Woodlawn by attending the opening day ceremonies and becoming the first signer of the guest register. Today I am honored to have the privilege of introducing Maine's current governor, John Baldacci, who, like his predecessor, recognizes the tremendous value that preserving and enhancing historic and cultural assets has to the people of our state. The Governor has joined us tonight to re-enact the events of August 1929 and to open the doorway to our future.”

Stephen C. Shea, President, Woodlawn Board of Trustees
August 20th, 2004





y Gala Celebration



“We are here to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Woodlawn Museum, an asset that is unique in this state and even in the nation!

The Woodlawn Museum and its collections exemplify the heritage and history of the downeast region of Maine. The Federal-style house, which was completed in 1827, contains the records, portraits, furniture and decorative items that belonged to three generations of the Black family. Colonel John Black was an early entrepreneur in the region, one of Maine’s first lumber barons, and he was involved in the politics and important events of his day. This house was his showplace and the home of his family, and he and his children kept ample records of their activities. It is because the house and its contents are intact as they were used, that they represent a significant historic asset for the region and even the nation.

As we celebrate the first 75 years of the Woodlawn Museum, I hope that we all can show our appreciation for this wonderful asset that is unique in our great state by helping to ensure that it is preserved for the future generations of the next 75 years.

Now I will proceed in the steps of my predecessor governor by cutting the opening ribbon and stepping into the museum to sign the guest register as the first visitor of the next 75 years.”

The Honorable John Baldacci
August 20th, 2004



Furnishings... (continued from page 1)



Figure 8. Writing desk with bookcase top, Boston area, ca. 1880s to 1990s, manufactured of 18th century components with later additions.

replacements for original mirrors. Additionally, one must question whether the top actually started out with the base, since the pilasters on either side of the doors terminate at their bases in an abrupt manner for 18th century cabinetwork. Another piece, with somewhat earlier restorations, is a very fine Boston area desk and bookcase in the library.

There are many other notable pieces of furniture in the house that are not touched upon here, but luckily for Maine residents and visitors it is all still here to see. The quality of many of the pieces of furniture and decorative arts in the house, and the documentation that is still emerging from the Black Family Archives, places this collection in the realm of national importance. It is little wonder that the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, one of the other beneficiaries of George Nixon Black's will, lamented in 1928 that the contents of the mansion were not coming their way, and that the *Boston Evening Transcript* boldly observed "Boston Loses, Maine Gains." ♡

A Glimpse into the Archives

John Black frequently visited the Kennebec and Penobscot Lands and often journeyed to Portland and Boston. As winter approaches, imagine the conditions John Black faced while traveling by stagecoach to Portland in February, 1840 at the age of 58. The trip took 25 hours over roads rough enough to cause a broken axel. Stopping only for a meal at Unity and three hours of sleep in Augusta, John Black describes this journey as one of the roughest of his life.

Sunday afternoon: 23: Feby: 1840 - Snow Squalls. Left home in the stage for Bangor... Travelling [sic] very muddy.

Mon: 24th: Feby: Very mild-soft weather. Left Bangor in Accom: Stage for Augusta at 7 A.M. found the road very bad. Arrived at Unity/halfway house/ at ½ past 2 P.M. and dined. Left about 3 P.M. and about 2 miles we met the Accom: Stage from Augusta, proceeded on very slowly and arrived at Getchell's corner at 10 P.M. Stop'd and took tea expecting it would freeze up the mud that is 8 or 9 inches deep. Started again about eleven P.M. Ground frozen but intolerably rough. At about 2 O'clock A.M. on Tues: 25th: Feby: when about 3 miles from Augusta broke the hind axel and there stop'd. Put my Buffalo skin on to one of the lead horses, mounted him, and rode to Augusta at ½ past 2. Such a journey I never had before. Went to bed at 3 A.M. was call'd at 6 A.M. Breakfasted and took a seat on the Stage for Portland, by the S.W. bend (so call'd) at 7 o'clock A.M. Road hard and very rough-did not arrive at Durham until half after three o'clock. Dined and then proceeded on to Portland where we arrived after eight o'clock. Quite fatigued.

Later, during this same trip through Salem to inspect a damaged vessel and then to Boston to order sails and rigging for his new schooner "Aurora," John Black notes the following frustration:

Sat. 29th Feby: Can not find a pair of Victoria shoes. They are entirely out of fashion.



Christmas at Woodlawn!

For the first time in its history, Woodlawn Museum has invited professional florists to decorate the mansion. Using artificial greens and flowers appropriate to 19th century Ellsworth, area florists will transform the elegant first floor rooms of Colonel Black's mansion into a visual delight.

When approached to participate in the project Gail Royal, owner of Westside Florist, was very enthusiastic. She recalled her family's long association with Woodlawn. Her mother was on the board, and she was friendly with the Eliasons' granddaughters and visited the house often when her family lived at the bottom of Bridge Hill. Gail will decorate the office and the dining room.



Once again, New Lands Nursery will supply the Ellsworth Area Community Christmas Tree to Woodlawn. This year the staff is also pleased to be planning decorations for the parlor and the library.

As yet no records have been found that reveal how the Blacks celebrated Christmas or how they decorated their home. This allows the staff of New Lands Nursery and Westside Florists to bring a fresh, but conservative eye to the interpretation of the mansion at Christmas time. The staff at Woodlawn hopes that this new partnership with area florists will grow each year and become a regular part of our holiday tradition. Tours of Woodlawn will be offered on the first three weekends in December (Saturday and Sunday December 4-5, 11-12, and 18-19) at 1, 2, and 3 PM. After the tour, enjoy hot chocolate or Woodlawn Tea and an assortment of cookies and other holiday treats. Tours and refreshments cost \$10.00 per person.

On Saturday, December 11, Woodlawn will host its 5th Annual *Candlelight Evening*, sponsored by the Union Trust Company. Area children will be invited to decorate the Community Christmas Tree, which will be lighted at the conclusion of *Candlelight Evening*. Hot chocolate and cookies, horse drawn wagon rides, a bon fire, and lots of holiday cheer make this event a truly memorable experience. The event is named after the 500 luminaries set up around the Museum that are "sponsored" by area community members who donate a dollar for each luminary, either in memory or honor of friends and loved ones. *Candlelight Evening* is one holiday event not to be missed.

If you are looking for an extra special gift for friends and family consider shopping at the Woodlawn Museum Store. The store is filled with many unique items including the Woodlawn ornament and Woodlawn's own distinctive blends of specially packaged tea. The gift shop also has great toys for children, holiday greeting cards, and delicious scone mix. You may also purchase a Museum Membership in the Museum Store which makes a great gift to friends or loved ones. As always, Woodlawn members receive 10% off all purchases. The Store is open every day from 1-4 PM or by appointment.

For more information on the house tours, the Museum Store, or for information on Woodlawn's *Candlelight Evening* please contact the Museum at 667-8671. 🍷

If you would like to sponsor a luminary, please send this form with your donation to:

Woodlawn Museum, PO Box 1478
Ellsworth, ME 04605

Woodlawn Museum's Candlelight Evening 2004 Help us light 500 Luminaries!

I agree to sponsor _____ luminaries
for a total of \$ _____
(One dollar per luminary)

Name _____
In memory/honor of _____



Collections Corner

It is not often that a new acquisition is made to the Woodlawn collection. This summer we received the rare gift of a memory book that once belonged to Elizabeth Black (1809-1863), second daughter of John and Mary Black. The book is filled with prose and verse written by her friends in Quincy and Taunton, Massachusetts at the time of Elizabeth's pending departure for Ellsworth. The entries were written in the fall of 1824 when Elizabeth was fifteen years old and was finishing a period of schooling in Massachusetts.

The women of the Black family are not well documented, so books such as this one are very precious. This artifact helps bring to life an individual who is not as well known as some of the Colonel's other children. We are grateful to the great, great-grandson of Elizabeth Black Dyer, Mr. Philip B. Parsons, Jr., who has entrusted us with this family memento. It will be used for research and to enhance the interpretation of the Black family. 🍷

Annual Appeal Update

Nancy P. Alexander, Chair, 2005 Annual Appeal

This past year was another success story for Woodlawn Museum and for you. We were able to sustain our current level of programming and to begin our museum renovations at the same time. We thank you very much for your support and interest.

Woodlawn continues to gain momentum in many areas: from increased visitation to winning a grant for the proper storage of our valuable original papers, from our Adult Lecture Series to the magnificent 75th Anniversary Gala, attended by the Governor. These successes come from you and your generous giving. Thanks to your support, we have the confidence and momentum to make these programs so successful. Annual events like Living History Days in August, and the Candlelight Evenings in December continue to attract wide participation. And this year, the Downeast Senior College and Woodlawn inaugurated a Croquet field at Woodlawn! Our commitment to offering the possibilities of Woodlawn to a broad spectrum of the public remains foremost in our activities, as this recital of successes demonstrates.

So once again, we are asking you to contribute to the Annual Appeal of 2005 for Woodlawn Museum. We rely on your contributions for our daily operations. We manage our expenses carefully to make the most of your contributions. The importance of your support and your interest cannot be overemphasized. Please help Woodlawn Museum again this year. Your generosity is most gratefully received and a return envelope is included for your convenience. 🍷

2004 Accomplishments

- Visitorship increase
- Balanced budget
- Children's game library
- Fabulous 75th Anniversary Gala
- Redesigned newsletter format
- Conservation of John Black papers
- Other papers cataloged and conserved
- New line of teas introduced
- Special events (*Easter Egg Hunt, Living History Day, Autumn Festival*)
- Institutional Records in process of cataloging and conservation (*includes history of Acadia National Park creation*)
- Improved website
- Represented at the Creative Economy Conference in Lewiston
- Use of Woodlawn properties available to public for weddings and events
- Preservation work underway!



The Preservation of Woodlawn is Well Underway!



Help keep the work going. Please visit

www.woodlawnmuseum.com

to learn about how you can participate in the preservation of Woodlawn Museum.

Give the Gift of a Woodlawn Museum Membership this Holiday Season!

Individual \$25 (18 or under \$5): All members receive free admission to the museum, invitations to special member events, a subscription to the Museum's quarterly newsletter, a 10% discount in our gift shop for purchases over \$10.00, an invitation to the Annual Members Tea, and notification of other special events at the Museum. All memberships expire one year from the anniversary date.

Household \$40: Membership benefits for two adults and all household members under 18, plus a 25% discount on events for which there is a fee, and 4 free guest passes for Black House tours.

Supporter \$100: Membership benefits for two adults and all household members under 18, plus a 25% discount on events for which there is a fee, and 8 free guest passes for Black House tours.

I enclose \$ _____ for Membership Dues at the _____ Level

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Name(s) _____ Street _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____ Phone _____

I would like to charge my membership on _____ Visa _____ Mastercard

Card Number _____ Expiration Date ____/____/____

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In addition to my Membership, I would also like to make donation to the Museum's Annual

Fund in the amount of \$25 _____ \$50 _____ \$75 _____ \$100 _____ Other _____

Membership dues and other contributions are tax deductible as provided by law.



Please mail completed form with your membership dues to:

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P.O. Box 1478
Ellsworth, Maine 04605**

Please make checks payable to the Woodlawn Museum.



Join us for Christmas at Woodlawn!

Holiday Tours and Refreshments

Saturday & Sunday December 4-5, 11-12, & 18-19

Tours at 1, 2, & 3 PM Cost: \$10 per person (\$5 for children)

2004 Candlelight Evening

December 11 from 4-7 PM

Sponsored by the Union Trust Company

The Museum Store

1-4 PM daily until December 23

Unique gifts and members receive 10% off!



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