



THOUGHTS ON THE HOMECOMING  
OF A CARVED OAK AND PINE CHEST ORIGINAL  
to  
THE OLD FAIRBANKS HOMESTEAD

by

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of the original Jonathan Fairbanks of Dedham

On Wednesday, June 18, 2003, Lynn Fairbank, the President of our Association and I, together with the famous dealer, Leigh Keno, were seated in the auction room of Christie's, at 20 Rockefeller Plaza, New York. We were awaiting the bidding that was to take place for a chest made in Dedham, Massachusetts, by a craftsman named John Houghton (1624-84). The chest was once a part of the original furnishings of the Old Fairbanks Homestead in Dedham. The catalogue for this auction listed the chest with its venerable history on page 69, fig. 133 -- illustrated in full color, with an estimate for its purchase price to range from \$6,000 to \$9,000. Knowing that this was a low estimate, I had discussed matters with the members of the board of the family Association, and was given permission by Lynn to seek donors who would help achieve the funding necessary to return the chest to the family Homestead.

The chest was probably sold by the last family resident, Rebecca, at or around the time of the sale of the house and land-- and its subsequent purchase by the Family Association from Mrs. J. Amory Codman and her daughter, Martha C. Codman who later married Maxim Karolik and contributed an outstanding collection of early Americana to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. That saga is covered in the last two *Courier* articles ( a family newsletter).

This month of June, a hundred years later, the chest, once lost, was about to be redeemed and returned. Lynn and I were confident that we would be able to meet the challenge of the auction. By numerous phone calls and letter-writing, I'd managed to obtain funds beyond the high estimate listed in the catalogue. I'd also obtained a list of pledges from both family members and friends that would sustain a potential bid to \$50,000.00. Also, just in case of a runaway auction, I had in my pocket names of persons who had promised to help in such an emergency. Yet little did we realize that two eager buyers lurked anonymously on phone lines. The first one dropped out when the bidding passed the mid \$50 thousand mark. The second bidder held on firmly until the final count that brought the gavel down (with buyer's premium) to \$71,700.

The family relic that had vanished into the antiques world a hundred years ago was redeemed at a dear ransom. For the two weeks after the auction, it has been an honor and joy for me to experience the positive response of those who care about history and who, with open-handed generosity, have mailed in donations to make this acquisition possible --not just for the Homestead and its history, but also for Dedham, the Historical Society of this Town, and all who seek to learn about America's early past. This week, the Fairbanks Family Association in America will send to Christie's a check for the purchase and delivery of the chest to the Homestead. This is made possible by more than fifty generous donors, many of whom wish to remain anonymous. Every board member made either a pledge or donation. Later this summer, those donors who wish to be honored and listed as special friends will be made public.

What makes this acquisition so expensive? Also, how do we know that this chest was actually owned by the family homestead? Firstly, all surviving examples of American furniture made in seventeenth century New England are rare and precious. That reason alone justifies a high auction price. But this work is extra special because it was pictured as part of the furnishings of the Fairbanks House in a precise drawing illustrated in plate 26 and published by the American Architect & Building News Company of 1898, part I. This publication, entitled "*The Georgian Period*" being Measured Drawings of Colonial Work, was the first significant architectural publication to record measured drawings of early historic homes in America. That the Old Fairbanks House of Dedham was selected for this publication is no accident, for this old house had been the

focus of antiquarian attention since the mid nineteenth century. But we are especially fortunate that the artist also decided to illustrate the "Oak Chest In Store Room 2d Story" as part of his measured drawings. That drawing is what identifies this chest specifically to the family homestead. The image and the chest itself is unmistakably one and the same. By the 1890's the chest was no longer a useful, functioning part of the home's furnishings. But still appreciated for whatever reasons, it was tucked away in storage.

How the chest is attributed to having been made by John Houghton of Dedham is a much more complex piece of detective work. That story leads back in time to 1980 when, at the Museum of Fine Arts, I was curator of a developing exhibition: *New England Begins, The Seventeenth Century*. It was my great good fortune to be working with a team of brilliant scholars, including Dr. Abbott Lowell Cummings, who had already published much of his extensive research on the architecture of the Fairbanks House. In the Medfield Historical Society I discovered two foliate carvings made of oak that were identified as fragments of the pulpit of the First Church of Medfield of 1655. These fragments led scholars Robert Trent and Robert St. George to records that identified the pulpit with both John Houghton and his master, John Thurston (1607-1685) who had come to the New World from County Suffolk, in Old England. He brought with him knowledge of woodworking skills known as joinery, framing and carving -- all of which he passed on to his apprentice John Houghton who had come to New England at age eleven-- not having trained as a woodworker abroad. The pulpit carvings are clearly related to furniture owned by the Dedham Historical Society. The workmanship is so distinctive that an attribution to Houghton is without question. Several other works are related. A chest remarkably similar to the Fairbanks house example was acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts in preparation for the exhibition, and illustrated in its catalogue: *New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1982), 3 vols, Vol. 3, pp. 534-536. Subsequent research by Dr. St. George led to his publication "Style and Structure in the Joinery of Dedham and Medfield, Massachusetts, 1635-1685," in *Winterthur Portfolio* 13 (1979), pp. 1-46. The Fairbanks chest was spotted by Robert St. George while touring the collections of the executive offices of the Seagram & Sons Corporate headquarters in downtown Manhattan, New York. It is from this remarkable building famous for its design by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in the 1950's that the chest migrated to auction at Christie's, despite my previous attempts to obtain the chest as a gift to the House. A paper label within the chest records the famous firm of Ginsburg & Levy, Inc./Antiques/ 815 Madison Ave./ New York as the source from which the chest was probably acquired by the firm of Seagram. Further research is needed to track the ownership of the chest backward in time to the early years of the last century.

Much has yet to be learned about our remarkable survivor, the Fairbanks chest, which comes to us containing potential stories yet untold. This brief report is but the beginning. Yet this moment highlights the fact that what was lost is now redeemed and returned. As Lynn and I left the auction one perceptive and admiring writer observed, "that such a return of a seventeenth century object back to its original site could only happen in New England." It should be added that this could not have happened without the many donors who generously gave to this need and opportunity to bring the chest back home.

