

LIFESTYLE



Spectacular Vernacular

by Peter Eaton
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A passerby might notice this early house and attached barn and comment on how nicely it has been restored and how appropriate the landscaping is to its setting. Small “Capes” like the one in our story are all over New England. But appearances can be deceiving. Hidden from view are well-designed structural additions, visible from the rear, and, at the end of a long sloping lawn, a seventeenth-century style “pool house.” Contained within both buildings is one of the finest collections of pre-Revolutionary vernacular New England material culture in private hands.

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The front of the original early eighteenth-century center-chimney house, onto which later extensions have been added.

The rear of the house and additions, looking up from the pool house.

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The kitchen has been opened up to provide an eating area that overlooks the lawns and pool house. The three-slat armchair was made in eastern Massachusetts, ca. 1740. The maple Queen Anne high chest, made on the Massachusetts North Shore, ca. 1740-1750, retains its original undisturbed brown-painted surface and unusual etched brasses. A "snakey-neck" goose by Joe Lincoln overlooks the scene. A "snakey-neck" goose by Joe Lincoln overlooks the scene. The shoe-foot hutch table made of hard pine, with oak feet, ca. 1750-1760, was found in Connecticut and is surrounded by four of the ten matching slat-back side chairs in the collection made on the Massachusetts South Shore, ca. 1740.





This view of the keeping room shows the massive baking fireplace filled with andirons and cooking utensils of the eighteenth century, most dating before 1750. The mushroom-armed banister-back armchair is from the Connecticut Shore, ca. 1720–1730. The Hinckley cradle has a place of prominence. The pierced-crested banister-back side chair is one of a close pair made north of Boston, ca. 1720–1735. The tulip and sunflower chest is from the Wethersfield/Hartford, Connecticut, area, ca. 1690–1700, and retains all of its original applied ornament. The box on the chest is one of a small group of similarly painted pieces from Hampton, New Hampton, and dated to the 1720–1730 period. The splay-legged New Hampshire tea table in the foreground retains its original red painted base and has a very fine scrubbed top.



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 Among the accessories sitting on top of the Massachusetts North Shore desk, in original brown paint, is a watercolor double portrait commemorating the marriage of Ezekiel Gilman Adams and his wife, on December 24, 1771. It is mounted on a pine board and encased in its original leather frame. Adams is a descendent of John Alden—as is the wife in the present collecting couple, making this a serendipitous discovery. The exceptional sampler above the desk is one of only a few examples from Mrs. Usher's school in Rhode Island. Sarah Fales signed her sampler with her birth date of 1783 and "Bristol, New E." Some of the others from the school are dramatically stitched with an all over black background like Sarah's border. The facing couples with tall hats are similar to figures found in Providence samplers, as is the layered format and the use of queen stitch in the floral borders.



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The paint-decorated, framed four-drawer chest from the Connecticut River Valley, ca. 1700–1715, was in a private collection for many years and unknown when books or articles celebrating this small school were written. The original decorative motifs and painted surfaces have been preserved under a thick coat of shellac. A nearly identical chest is in the collection of the Springfield Museum, Massachusetts. The five Westerwald jugs are part of a large collection of German stoneware.

I met the home owners in 1974, when they stopped by my shop in New Hampshire. It quickly became apparent that we shared a common interest in the earliest forms of New England furniture and an appreciation for old surfaces. While my interest was, in a sense, learned or acquired, theirs was genetic and probably inescapable—the wife is a direct descendent of John Alden and the husband lists both John Brewster and Stephen Hopkins among his ancestors. Through the years we have built a long-term personal as well as business relationship.

The contents of their eighteenth-century home on the South Shore of Massachusetts, which they have shared for nearly fifty years, is fitting testimony to their consistency, taste, and passion. As the room settings here show, they have assembled very rare furniture, textiles, and pottery in a



comfortable living space where they raised four daughters, and where their many grandchildren now gather. The collectors point out that the only object ever damaged was a mirror knocked over by a family cat!

As their family and collection grew, more space was needed and they added the large family room facing the rear gardens and grounds. In the 1990s they added the pool house, a near copy of the 1680 Jethro Coffin house on Nantucket. Made entirely with hand tools and using the framing and finish materials that would have been used in the seventeenth century, today that little house looks like it has been there for centuries and is filled with some of the earliest material from their collection.

Often collections showcase a few key pieces and use lesser objects to fill in the space. Such is not the case here. In fact, the couple's home is so casual and comfortable that the significance of what the collection contains can easily be overlooked. The redware from the Massachusetts South Shore is exceptional, as is the German stoneware. Theirs is one of the best collections of New England schoolgirl needlework in the country. Assembled with the help and guidance of Stephen and Carol Huber, the couple became interested in the textiles after the wife made and hung curtains that she embroidered. Realizing the significance of needlework within the families of the young ladies who stitched these pictures at schools in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and their emphasis on religion in daily life, the collectors have focused on

English and Dutch ceramics sit on the eighteenth-century New Hampshire cupboard in the dining room. The slat-back chairs are part of a collection of ten side chairs and two armchairs, all from the same shop south of Boston, ca. 1725-1740. Visible through the doorway are a pierced-crested armchair in original black paint, ca. 1720, from the Massachusetts North Shore, and the hooded settle, a simple board piece in dry red paint, from New Hampshire, ca. 1780.

FACING PAGE

This view of the dining room shows more of the slat-backs as well as a rare and exceptionally well-turned Rhode Island gateleg table, ca. 1720-1730. The tall clock is by Paul Rogers of Berwick, Maine, ca. 1785, and retains its original color and surface. It is considered by Joseph Katra Jr., the authority on Maine clocks, to be the earliest clock made in Maine. The ball-foot chest in the corner, made in eastern Massachusetts or New Hampshire, ca. 1740, has particularly fine feet, original brasses, and retains its original red paint





The small one-piece desk on the fireplace wall is unusual enough to be considered unique. Made of pine, poplar, and sycamore, and only twenty-four inches wide, it has a framed panel lid, an interior with a well, and retains its original butterfly hinges. With a shaped skirt and boldly turned oak legs terminating in ball feet, it is remarkable in concept. Interestingly, there is another desk in a private California collection identical in every respect, but with cross stretchers. Both pieces were found near New Haven, Connecticut, and were probably made there for siblings, ca. 1720-1730.

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Seen through the front hall are two of the finest pieces in the collection. The ball-turned stretcher table made of walnut and retaining its original surface was made in Boston, ca. 1680-1700. It was discovered in Florida, where it had been since the early twentieth century. The William and Mary high chest was also made in Boston, ca. 1725-1730. The turned legs and feet are exceptional, as is the matched crotch walnut veneer on the drawers. The chest retains a fine old finish and its original brasses.

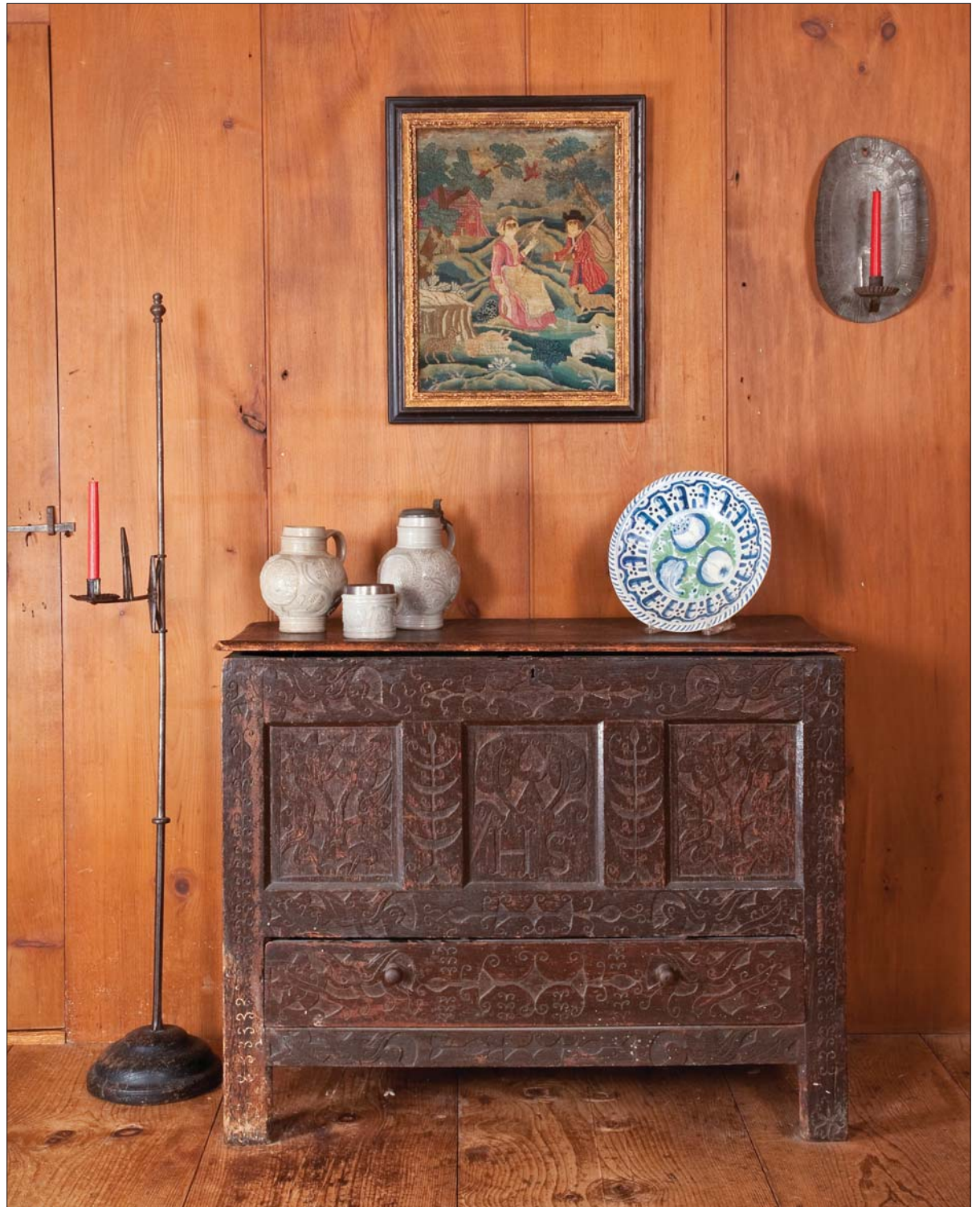




early canvaswork, of which they have accumulated over a dozen, and samplers preceding the nineteenth century. Their careful selections include samplers from the school of Martha Pease Davis, Warren, Rhode Island, from, Mrs. Usher's school, Bristol, Rhode Island; and from Sarah Stivour's school in Salem, Massachusetts. They also own an early Adam and Eve sampler from Boston, and a New York sampler with layered format.

Furniture has been a main interest, and among the highlights

The Massachusetts North Shore dresser shown was listed for sale in a small-town Florida newspaper. Cleaned down to its original paint, it retains its original knobs and cotter pin hinges, and was probably made either in coastal Massachusetts or in New Hampshire, ca. 1735–1750. It makes a fine display piece for part of the couple's collection of New England redware and early English pottery. The boldly turned cross-base stand is from Rhode Island, ca. 1720–1735. The Boston leather chair, ca. 1720–1735, with arched and molded crest, retains its original black paint and full Spanish feet. Over the chair and stand is a beautifully stitched wool canvaswork by a daughter of the Wing family of Sandwich, Massachusetts, and "worked" in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. It relates to only one other known American piece with these motifs, which are largely taken from seventeenth-century English pattern books. The light-blue background projects the floral and animal designs complete with resting stag and lion.



of their collection are a spindle-turned Hinckley family cradle, a Boston upholstered armchair, a seventeenth-century tape loom, three carved document boxes—two from the Dennis/Searle shops—a seventeenth-century center table from Springfield, Massachusetts, the Bonney family “tuck-a-way” table, a “Brewster” chair, several “Carver” chairs, a Tinkham chair, several important Boston leather chairs, a Boston couch or daybed, stretcher tables, a tulip and sunflower chest, a Hadley chest, a fabulous paint decorated Connecticut Valley chest of drawers and a clock with dial signed by Paul Rogers of Berwick, called “the earliest tall clock made in Maine”; it is

The chest over drawer from the Hadley/Hatfield area of the Connecticut River Valley, ca. 1690-1715, retains its original deep red paint under an old, worn coat of varnish. It was found in an attic in Indiana in the 1980s, stuffed with quilts. The identity of the initials “HS” is not known. Over the choice pieces of European stoneware and charger hangs a rare canvaswork picture stitched ca. 1740 in the Boston area. A spinner and a shepherd sit in a landscape, a scene taken from a series of prints referred to as “The Fishing Lady,” engraved in France in the late seventeenth century and widely copied by young ladies in Boston.





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Among the furniture in the “great room,” a relatively new wing added to the house, is a maple gateleg table is from eastern Massachusetts, ca. 1720–1730. A Joe Lincoln goose sits on the table. The banister-back armchair from the Waltham area of Massachusetts, ca. 1740, was one of the couple’s first acquisitions. The Queen Anne-style clock is signed by John Bailey II of Hanover, Massachusetts, ca. 1785. The engraved decoration on the dial is filled with colored wax—a rare feature. The pierced-crested banister-back armchair, with “ram’s-horn” arms and boldly turned stretchers, retaining its original red paint, is from Boston, ca. 1720, and is exceptional. The octagonal-topped candlestand with telescoping post is from Rhode Island, ca. 1740–1760. The Massachusetts gateleg table beside the sofa, also with original surface, is only twenty-six inches long. The stoneware jug, dating to the sixteenth century and splashed with manganese, and the wrought iron eighteenth-century lighting device, with turned brass finial, reflect the quality of accessories throughout the collection.

ABOVE

The stretcher table shown here is one of the finest to survive from the late seventeenth century. Probably made in Boston, ca. 1660–1680, the quality of the shaped skirt and complex turnings are unsurpassed. Despite being found without its original top, the collectors recognized its rarity and importance, and it centers a wall in their great room. Shown are two of the couple’s five leather chairs, ca. 1715–1720. The example on the left, with carved and pierced stretcher and crest rail, and original black paint, is from Boston. The chair on the right, from New York, ca. 1715–1720, also retains its original paint. These are two of the finest leather chairs to have survived—each is “best of form” and in original condition and surface. The document box with slanted lid, original large butterfly hinges, and large flattened ball feet, retains a remarkable first coat of dry red paint. Made of pine with cherry feet, it may be either from New England or New York, ca. 1720–1740. Over the box is a large and imposing sampler stitched by Betsy Moseley in 1794 at the school of Sarah Stivour in Salem, Massachusetts. Typical of her school are the long, floating diagonal stitches and a center cartouche with alphabets, verse, and inscription.



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The Boston couch or daybed, ca. 1720-1725, is remarkable for its form and condition. With a picture-frame crest, crisp finials and vase turnings, and retaining its full feet and original black paint, it remains in nearly perfect condition.

The maple tuck-a-way table, ca. 1720-1730, with vase-and-ring turned posts and notched shoe feet, has a six-inch wide top. The table descended in the Bonney family—whose ancestors lived in the collectors' present home, and was reportedly used in the house in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The three document boxes shown here reflect the quality and depth of the collection. The top box is one of a very small number of pieces from the Hampton, New Hampshire, area, ca. 1710-1720, and retains its original painted decoration. The middle box, from Connecticut, ca. 1670-1690, and the Dennis/Searle box on the bottom, ca. 1660-1675, are exceptional, deeply-carved examples retaining their original painted surfaces; they were part of a North Shore, Massachusetts, collection formed in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

The paneled and spindle-turned cradle in old green paint, which descended in the husband's family from Governor Hinckley of Barnstable, is a great rarity. Made of oak and pine, probably in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, it is one of two American examples of this quality to have survived. The other is in the Winslow/Crocker House in Yarmouth, Massachusetts.

The spool-turned tape loom, made of maple and oak in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, retains its original crusty mustard-colored painted surface. Found in the attic of a seventeenth-century farm in Ipswich, it is similar in form and turning pattern to a baptismal stand from Salem donated to the Essex Institute (now the Peabody Essex Museum) in the 1870s.

The Boston upholstered armchair, ca. 1715-1725, made of maple and retaining an old black paint on the frame, is one of perhaps a dozen that have survived. This example is unusual in that the skirt is shaped on the sides as well as the front. The owners had fabric made to match fabric used in the period, but waited nearly five years to upholster the chair because the husband didn't want to obscure its beautiful sculptural framework.

Adam and Eve face the tempting apple tree in this sampler worked by Agatha Edwards in 1749, measuring 19½ x 8½ inches. One of a small group with this design, they were worked in Boston's North End and feature such elements as the half-circle foreground scattered with animals to be found on earlier Adam and Eve samplers from the same area.

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The Cooke family crest, ca. 1750, 22 x 21 inches, is the only coats of arms in the collection. The unknown maker embroidered her large work in an overall tent stitch in wool, as opposed to the more typical silk stitching on a black silk background, and placed the insignia in a square instead of a diamond shape, which was popular at the time.

It is unknown where Elizabeth Byles, born in 1722, in Newport, Rhode Island, worked this rare canvaswork picture of Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus, measuring 12¼ x 15¾ inches. The subject and technique, commonly found in seventeenth-century English needlework, is unusual to America in this form. The date "1735" is inscribed in ink on the lower portion of the linen, and in the stitching something that appears to be another date, illegible except for the numbers "175," suggesting that this was a project Elizabeth started earlier and finished at a later date. It was possibly stitched in Boston, where she had family. Her grandmother was Reverend Cotton Mather's granddaughter.

Hester Moore, aged eight years, stitched this New York sampler in 1786, measuring 17 x 23 inches. It belongs to a group of samplers worked in the New York City area between the 1740s and the 1840s. The designs were mostly taken from Dutch tiles depicting stories from the Bible, and stitched by girls who were mostly members of the Dutch Reform Church. This is one of the largest renditions and within each layer can be seen portrayals of various parables.

In this canvaswork picture worked by a Parker School girl of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, circa 1750, measuring 13 x 19 inches, a red-jacketed hunter on horseback pursues a running stag chased by dogs, while sheep stand quietly by and birds dart in all directions. The layered ground and sky are unusual and delineate sections she worked with one color in her needle.







The “pool house” is a 1990s replica of the 1680 Jethro Coffin house on Nantucket and was built in the authentic manner using period techniques. Within this two-floor structure is some of the earliest material in the collection.

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This staged photo in front of the pool house depicts the visually “tactile” surface quality of the aging clapboards of the house and the painted surfaces of the furniture displayed within. The Carver chair, ca. 1670-1690, to the left, descended in the family of one of the first settlers of Danvers, Massachusetts. The chest with drawer is from Plymouth County, has saw-tooth carving on both the drawer and case, is punch decorated across the entire drawer front, and retains a rich, old salmon-color painted surface. This is one of five punch-decorated chests in the collection, one of which is the earliest known dated six-board chest with a scrolled skirt. The turned chair on the right, with a row of spindles below the seat and slots for a board seat, dates to 1660-1675, and is probably from the Boston area. The oak and pine desk box, made in eastern Massachusetts in the third quarter of the seventeenth century, is a remarkable survival and retains its original red and black paint and great cock’s-comb hinges. Descended in the Wetherbee family of Marlborough, Massachusetts, when found it was filled with Wetherbee family papers dating from the early eighteenth through the late nineteenth centuries.

one of three early tall clocks in the collection. These pieces and more are complemented by tribal rugs, candlesticks, and numerous small treasures. The depth and breadth of this collection cannot be captured in one article. Every object has been chosen for its rarity, form, and surface quality.

Many of the objects have interesting or unusual histories. The Massachusetts North Shore dresser in the den, holding much of the redware, was discovered listed in the want ads in a small town newspaper in Florida. The ball-turned stretcher table in the front bedroom was also found in Florida. It had gone south in 1916 and remained in the same sunroom until spotted by a New England picker who moonlighted as a house painter. The Hadley chest was found full of quilts in an attic in Indiana. It had migrated by wagon from central Massachusetts in the late eighteenth century to Ohio, then to Indiana in the late nineteenth century. The wonderful spool-turned tape loom, on the



This carved and paneled chest was probably made in Newbury, Massachusetts, ca. 1690-1700. A marriage chest, it is initialed "T & M C." A chest carved by the same hand is in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The document box on the chest is one of the finest surviving examples from the Massachusetts South Shore, ca. 1680-1690.

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The great chair in front of the fireplace is from the Massachusetts North Shore, ca. 1690-1710, and the gooseneck andirons were found in a bricked up fireplace in an old tavern in Salisbury, Massachusetts. The easy chair is a "make-do," converted in the nineteenth century from a ladder-back arm chair.

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In the foreground of the great hall is a large tavern table with shaped apron from the Springfield, Massachusetts, area, ca. 1700. It is flanked by an armchair from the Tinkham family of the South Shore of Massachusetts, ca. 1720-1730, and a "Cromwellian" chair from Boston, ca. 1660-1680. The four drawer oak chest with applied spindles and half ball feet is from Plymouth County, ca. 1780-1700. The oak and pine box on frame from the Boston area, ca. 1700, is a rare survival. The ball-footed document box with applied molding is from Massachusetts, ca. 1720-1740, and retains its original red paint. The Carver chair to the left is from the Boston area, ca. 1700-1710.



other hand, hardly moved at all. It was found in Ipswich, in the attic of the longest continually owned working farm in New England. The Carver chair in the great hall of the pool house descended in the family of General Israel Putnam of Danvers, Massachusetts. The sunflower chest and painted Connecticut chest were long in storage in one of the country's major museums, reportedly traded out in exchange for work performed in the 1950s. The 'tuck-a-way' table was acquired from the Bonney family, and family members stated that it had actually been used in the current owner's house in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Hinckley cradle, arguably the rarest piece in the collection, descended in the husband's family.

Putting together a collection of this quality and scope takes both focus and passion. Being able to assemble the pieces into a warm and comfortable home requires a sensitivity to the objects, as well as to time and place. It is that sensitivity that has created what you see here. As the husband says, "We feel that we are preserving part of our history for future generations. These things

were part of everyday life for people, and it's that connection to the past and the warmth and beauty of early surfaces that have always resonated most with us. If I walk by a piece in our collection and don't notice it, I shouldn't own it!" [AFA](#)

The collectors would like to thank Brian Cullity and Stephen and Carol Huber for their help in forming the collection. They would particularly like to thank Peter Eaton. "We knew that we needed the guidance of someone who was knowledgeable and specialized in the things that we cared about. We feel fortunate to have developed a long-term relationship of trust with Peter. He has helped us develop our taste, and an understanding and appreciation of style, surface, and beauty."

*With appreciation to **Stephen and Carol Huber** for their contribution to the text.*

***Peter Eaton** is an antiques dealer specializing in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century furniture and decorative arts. He lives with his wife, folk art dealer Joan Brownstein, in Newbury, Massachusetts, where their shop is also located.*