

Historic Townsend Table Returns to Newport

In October of 2014 an inquiry came to Newport from a couple in California about a table they wanted an appraisal for and more information about. Their daughter had tried to find information about it online and her internet search led to Newport furniture maker Jeffrey Greene. Jeffrey is a furniture maker specializing 18th-century Newport furniture and a leading authority on the work of the Goddard and Townsend cabinetmakers. He and his wife Christine own *the Ball & Claw*, the showroom of his work in Newport.

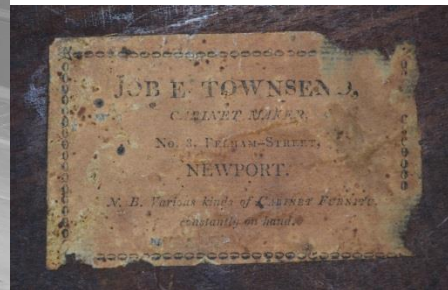
The California couple sent along some photos of the table, an elliptical card table in the Hepplewhite style dating from the early 1800s. This mahogany table had long, straight, tapered legs and inlaid lacewood decoration and was similar to card tables made in every American city at the time. What set this one apart was the printed label on the underside of the top. It read:

Job E. Townsend, Cabinet Maker
No. 3, Pelham-Street
Newport
N.B. Various kinds of Cabinet Furniture
constantly on hand.



Card table in mahogany with inlays of maple, ebony, and lacewood by Job E. Townsend (1781-1818).

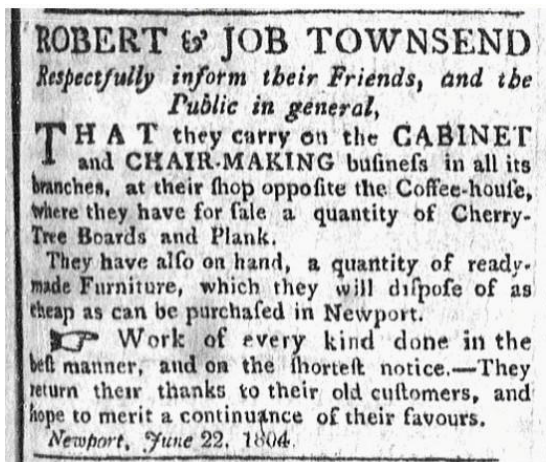
Below: original label on underside of top



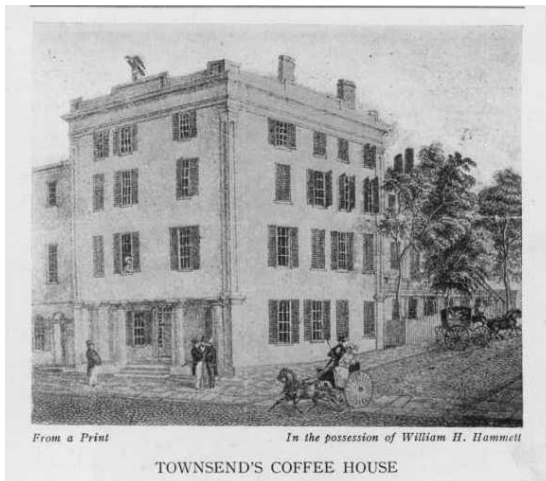
In the 1700s, furniture making was one of the leading trades of Newport, with about 175 craftsmen working here over the course of the century. The Townsends were among the premiere cabinetmakers of the city, setting the high bar for design and craftsmanship and teaching sons and apprentices, including a young John Goddard, who later married into the family. Job was a common first name in the family, and there were at least four Job Townsends who worked as cabinetmakers and several more who went into other trades. So who was this Job E. Townsend who worked at 3 Pelham Street?

From his research on the Townsends, Greene knew immediately that this was the work of one of the more obscure family members. “We knew of a Job E. Townsend working at this time from a single newspaper advertisement and genealogical records, but none of his furniture had ever been identified”, said Greene. “It was like finding a missing puzzle piece to add to what we know of the Newport cabinetmaking trade.”

This Job E. (Edmund) Townsend was a third-generation cabinetmaker born in 1781 who lived for only 37 years, dying in 1818 after a long illness. He was the son of Edmund Townsend (1736-1811), a well-known cabinetmaker, and grandson of Job Townsend Sr. (1699-1765), who along with his brother Christopher (1701-1787) began the long line of Townsend cabinetmakers in Newport. Both Job E.’s father Edmund and grandfather Job Sr. served as Newport’s town treasurer for decades were held in high esteem for their upstanding character and commitment to civic duty.



Until the discovery of this labeled table, this third-generation craftsman was known only from an 1804 advertisement (left) in the Newport Mercury that stated that Job Townsend and his older brother Robert Townsend “carry on the cabinet and chair-making business in all its branches at their shop opposite the Coffee-house”. The coffee house was *Townsend’s Coffee House* at the corner of Thames and Pelham Streets, owned by their uncle Thomas Townsend, himself a cabinetmaker of considerable skill before buying the coffee house about 1790.



The cabinetmaking business across from the coffee house located it in one of the busiest areas in Newport. More than just a coffee shop, *Townsend’s* was more like a modern hotel, with rooms for traveling businessmen and officers from nearby Fort Adams, a restaurant and bar, and a club-like parlor where prominent men met to discuss business and read the papers. It was described at the time as “the place of all others in Newport and the most aristocratic”. President John Quincy Adams visited and dined there in 1826. *Townsend’s Coffee House*, later *Townsend’s Hotel*, continued in operation into the 1840s under Thomas Townsend Jr., who renovated it

extensively in 1836 and renamed it the *Eagle Hotel*. In addition, Pelham Street became the first street in America to have gas lighting in 1805, making the location even better and drawing as many as fifty visitors every evening. The intersection of Thames and Pelham Streets was known as Townsend’s Corner well into the 20th century.

Job E.'s older brother Robert died in 1805 leaving him sole possession of the business at age 24. He continued the business for another twelve years until his death in 1818. No examples of Robert Townsend's furniture as yet been identified, and were it not for this card table, Job E. would have remained equally unknown.

The owners knew little about the history of the table, but it had been in their family for many generations and their family traced their roots to nearby Little Compton, Rhode Island. Now that the table had been identified as an important example, the question arose as to what to do with it. Greene suggested that it should be acquired by a museum and displayed as an important part of Newport's cabinetmaking heritage. He contacted Pieter Roos, then Executive Director of Newport Restoration Foundation, who agreed that it should be part of Doris Duke's Whitehorne House collection. Roos flew to California to see the table in person and acquire it for the museum. The owners agreed to sell it but wanted Jeffrey Greene to build an exact replica of it for their children. In December 2016 the table returned to Newport after over two centuries, where it was given a prime space in the front parlor of the Whitehorne House on Thames Street, just a stone's throw from where it was built. Within a few months, Greene's replica (below) was complete and on its way to California, where it takes the place of the original and will be passed to future generations of the family.



“A great many of Newport's treasures have been scattered over the centuries, so it's rewarding to have a piece return to where it was made”, says Greene. “In addition, this particular piece fills in a gap in our knowledge of the Townsend family and their work and shows them still working into the 19th century. The research into this piece has led to more discoveries in the later generations of the Townsends and Goddards, and we now know they were working into the early 20th century, extending their dynasty to six generations, nearly doubling what we knew of their working years.” Greene is compiling this and his other research in an upcoming book, *The Art and Mystery: Six Generations of Townsend and Goddard Cabinetmakers*.

The Job E. Townsend card table is now a permanent part of the collection of Newport Restoration Foundation's Samuel Whitehorne House Museum at

414 Thames Street. The museum is closed for the season but open by appointment. It will open with a museum re-launch in the spring of 2018.