

A Newport Desk Bearing the Inscription *S. Goddard*

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The recent discovery of an *S. Goddard* inscription in a Newport desk (fig. 1) holds a significance that exceeds the rarity of the inscription. Few examples of Newport furniture bear signatures, and fewer bear the name of a member of the Goddard family. Beyond that, the presence, position, and orientation of the inscription offer insight into Newport family shop practices. This example suggests that Newport pieces are often the product of many hands, which is perhaps a reason why the work of some Newport shops was often unsigned by a single individual.



Figure 1. Newport desk bearing the inscription *S. Goddard*, mahogany, 42”h, 39”w, 23”d, private collection. (Helga Photo Studio)

The S. Goddard inscription (fig. 2) is inside the center drawer behind the prospect door of the desk. The desk itself is typical in design and construction of the best Newport desks, and is made of handsomely-figured San Dominion mahogany. The inscription ties the piece to the family workshop of John Goddard (1723-1785), who worked independently and with some of his many sons during his career. After his death in 1785, the business continued in the family's shop with two of his younger sons.

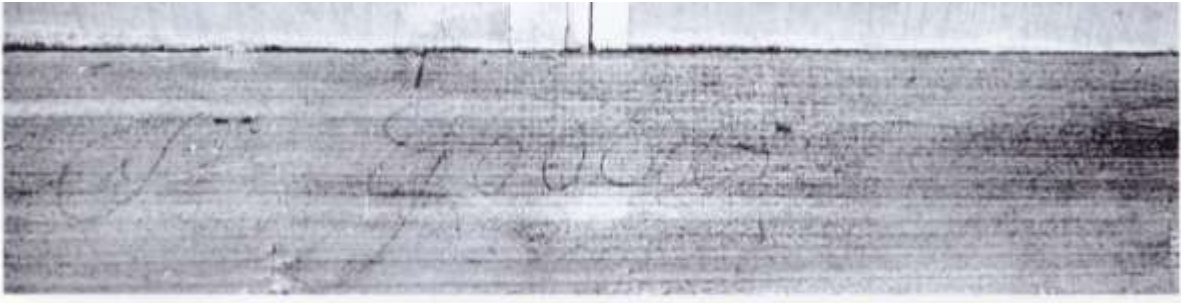


Figure 2. Graphite inscription on inner drawer side behind prospect door, *S. Goddard*. (Helga Photo Studio)

John Goddard apprenticed under Job Townsend, Sr. (1699-1765) and married Job's daughter Hannah in 1746. Over the next twenty-two years they had sixteen children. Of the ten sons who lived past infancy, six are known to have followed him into the cabinetmaking trade, and two had names beginning with the letter *S* (see table below).

His second child, Solomon, was born November 23, 1749, and Stephen, the twelfth child, was born March 25, 1764. Nothing is known of Solomon's life beyond his recorded birth: his name does not surface in public records thereafter and he is not mentioned or accounted for in his father's 1785 will. Except for occasional scant census evidence of a male of about the right age, there is nothing to show he lived beyond childhood. Stephen, on the other hand, carried on the cabinetmaker's trade in Newport with his brother Thomas until his death in 1804.

John Goddard's well-known letter to Moses Brown of October 12, 1763 concludes with, "...thou must have expected I should Engag'd work to keep my Boys Employ'd if it Should a little Retard thy work, for we must do so or we Should be out of Employment...".¹ The letter does not indicate how many "boys" Goddard had working with him at the time, nor if they are actually his sons, though he may have had as many as three sons of apprenticeship age at the time. In the 18th-century, apprenticeships began at age 13 and lasted until age 21. The census of 1774 indicates four males

¹ Collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society, also Moses, Michael and Israel Sack, Inc., *Master Craftsmen of Newport*, Tenafly, NJ, 1984. p. 197.

over age 21 in the John Goddard household, consistent with John and his three eldest sons, who would have been 27, 25, and 24 years old if they were all still at home.² Whether one of these four males is the mysterious Solomon or another person remains unknown.

In December 1776 British forces occupied Newport and remained until October 1779.

Upon their withdrawal, Goddard's oldest son Daniel, then 32, left for Nova Scotia where many loyalists went after the British occupation to avoid reprisals. Job and Henry (then 19 and 17) either went with him or followed shortly thereafter, and all three are listed as cabinetmakers there in 1786.³ The Rhode Island census of 1782 confirms their departure as only Goddard's three youngest sons are indicated and the older sons are not listed in any other town.⁴

John Goddard died in 1785 and his will mentions ten surviving children (Solomon is not among them), nine of whom were to share any proceeds of his estate. His oldest son Daniel is not included because he had already received his share. Two sons, Stephen and Thomas, then 21 and 20 years old, were given special consideration. He bequeathed to them "all my tools of every kind which I used to work with in carrying on my business", and "the use and benefit of my shop, were I used to work, so long as their mother shall live" with the provision that "all my stock of mahogany (bequeathed to his wife) and other stuff to be worked up by them for the support and benefit of my wife and minor children".⁵

At the time of Goddard's death, his oldest cabinetmaking son remaining in Rhode Island, Townsend Goddard, was known to have had a cabinetmaker's shop on "Town's Land", separate from his father's shop. He had previously worked outside of Newport, across the bay in Kingston, during the British occupation. Townsend served as executor of the will and died only a few years later in 1790.⁶ The census of 1790 shows only Stephen and Thomas still living in Newport as heads of small households.⁷ There is no information on sons John, Benjamin, or Edmond.

The handwriting of the *S. Goddard* signature is remarkably similar to that of Daniel Goddard's signature on an elaborately carved kneehole bureau (fig. 3); both signatures have great overarching tops on each lowercase *d*. Solomon and Daniel, being within 21 months in age, would have attended school simultaneously and would likely have had similar penmanship training. The other S.

² *Census of the Inhabitants of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations 1774*, John R. Bartlett, Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1858.

³ Moses p. 200, 253.

⁴ *Rhode Island 1782 Census*, Jay Mack Holbrook, Oxford, Mass.: Holbrook Research Institute, 1979.

⁵ excerpted in Carpenter, Ralph E., Jr., *Arts and Crafts of Newport*, Newport, Rhode Island: The Preservation Society of Newport County, 1954 p. 15.

⁶ Carpenter, p. 20.

⁷ *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790: Rhode Island*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908.

Goddard, Stephen, was born 15 years later and is known to have been a prolific furniture maker, putting the date of the desk after about 1780. There is little possibility that the inscription is by the unknown Solomon and it is most likely that of Stephen Goddard working with his father or brothers. A Stephen Goddard signature on a bill of sale is visibly different from the desk inscription, but it is by pen and ink on paper and may have been made many years apart (fig 4).



Figure 3. Kneehole bureau by Daniel Goddard and chalk inscription, *Daniel Goddard – his Draugh*, from Moses, *Master Craftsmen of Newport*, p. 265, 291.

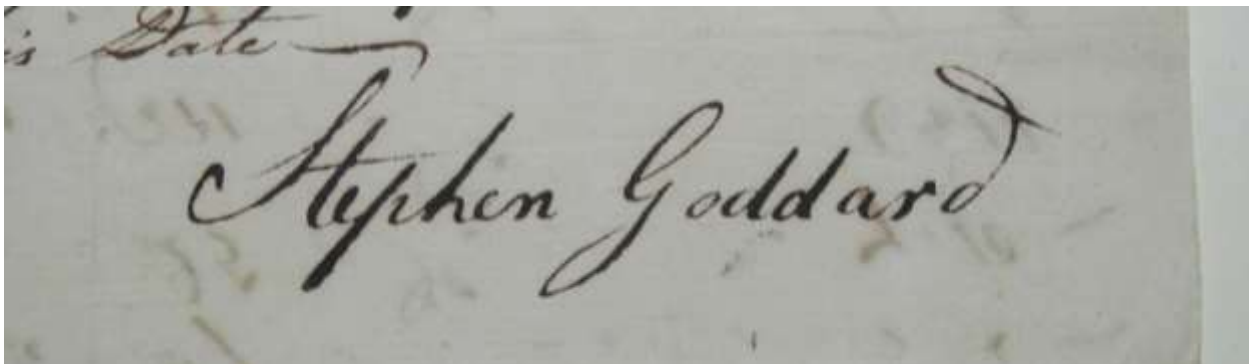


Figure 4. Pen and ink signature of Stephen Goddard, collection of the Newport Historical Society.

The *S. Goddard* desk inscription is in graphite inside one of the desk's interior drawers. It is upside down on the inner side surface of the middle drawer behind the prospect door. Being upside down and contained within the drawer side, the name appears to have been written after the drawer was fully assembled. The signature, hidden as it is, implies that S. Goddard made, or at least dovetailed, the small interior drawers; fine work to be sure, and one of the more detailed and time-consuming aspects of desk construction.

Signatures of principal makers are usually found in places where they can be found without too much searching. Such inscriptions or labels are found on the back of the prospect door, within the case, on the backboards, or on a large drawer bottom in other signed Newport examples. Those signatures often include *made by ...*, a date, and sometimes *Newport*. The *S. Goddard* inscription, given its position and orientation, doesn't take credit for the entirety of the desk, but it does record his participation in its building.

It is not unusual to find names or initials in unlikely places within Newport furniture, indicating many hands at work on a single piece. A chest-on-chest in the collection of the Newport Historical Society is authenticated to John Townsend, but the lower case also contains the initials *HAR* inscribed on a drawer rail. Differences in the upper and lower case drawer dovetails and their markings show two craftsmen at work. A three-drawer block-front bureau authenticated to and initialed by Edmund Townsend bears several signatures of James Goddard (b. 1752, John Goddard's nephew). A 1765 receipt in the collection of the Newport Historical Society shows James to be an apprentice in Edmund's shop.⁸ A well-documented but as yet undiscovered example of combined efforts is the "large mahogany desk with Edmund Townsend – £330" noted in 1767 in the account book of Job Townsend Jr.⁹

Shop size likely contributed to this collaborative effort as well, and Newport family shops were modest in size. A watercolor sketch of the Goddard shop shows it to have been no larger than a modern two-car garage.¹⁰ Goddard's will mentions five benches of joiner's tool in this shop, implying it could hold that many joiners at times. With little space and plentiful sons, it is little wonder that several craftsmen would have worked on a single piece.

This collaborative family effort may well be the reason why John Goddard signed so few pieces himself after his early years. If furniture from the Goddard family shop was the product of many hands, it seems unlikely that one craftsman would be so presumptuous to take credit for the piece as

⁸ Illustrated in Moses p. 261.

⁹ *Account Book of Job Townsend Jr.* Newport Historical Society

¹⁰ Downing, Antoinette F. and Vincent J. Scully Jr. *The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island: 1640-1915*, New York: Bramell House, 1952, pl. 7.

a whole. That didn't preclude S. Goddard from making sure his very fine work didn't remain anonymous.

Regardless of the circumstances leading to the *S. Goddard* inscription, it definitively ties this well-executed desk to the Goddard family shop and adds to the body of known work produced during Newport's tumultuous postwar years. Assuming it is the inscription of Stephen Goddard, it attests to the skill level he achieved under his father's guidance and speaks well of the work of the third generation of Townsend and Goddard cabinetmakers in continuing the family tradition of craftsmanship.

Table 1.
John Goddard (1723-1785) and Hannah (Townsend) Goddard
Birth Dates of Children

Daniel*	1747
Solomon	1749
Townsend*	1750 (d.1790)
Mary	1752
Rebecca	1751
John	1755 (died in infancy)
Catherine	1757
John	1758
Job*	1760
Henry	1761 (died in infancy)
Henry*	1762
Stephen*	1764 (d.1804)
Thomas*	1765 (d.1858)
Benjamin	1766
Edmund	1767
Susanna	1769

Sources: Bjerko, *The Cabinetmakers of America*, Rhode Island Vital Record, transcript of Goddard family bible, NHS.

*documented as cabinetmakers