

# American Neoclassicism—Jefferson versus Emerson

by Bob Frishman

When Ralph Waldo Emerson addressed Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa Society in August 1837, he declared that it was time for our nation's culture to declare independence from European influences. In "The American Scholar," he rejected Federalist and Neoclassical principles embraced by post-Revolution leaders who viewed the new nation as a reincarnation of ancient Athens and Rome. While thousands of American public buildings continue to look like Greek temples, hundreds of thousands of American private homes feature pillars and pediments, and uncounted numbers of American furniture pieces incorporate carved columns, swags, leaves, and urns, by 1840 the country was turning away from Classical ideals and developing fresh American styles and philosophies.

On the weekend of November 14-16, 2014, I was one of 80 participants in Deerfield, Massachusetts, at Historic Deerfield's 2014 Decorative Arts Forum. The 2014 theme and forum title was "Borrowing from Antiquity to Design a New Republic: Neoclassicism in America." Well-known curators, collectors, and restorers were speakers and were in the audience, and all contributed to better understandings of the roots and consequences of Classical influences on our nation's founding generation. Skinner auctioneers and appraisers and Thomas Schwenke of Woodbury, Connecticut, a longtime American Federal furniture expert and dealer, sponsored the event.

Some of us arrived early on Friday afternoon for optional workshops prior to the opening reception, and I chose "Inspired by Pompeii: Neoclassical Ceramics for the American Home," presented by Amanda Lange, curatorial department director of Historic Deerfield. Seated around a padded table in the backstage Esleek Room of the Flynt Center of Early American Life, a small group of us was shown and could handle ceramics in the Neoclassical style. With their restrained and symmetrical ornamentation, these candlesticks, teapots, urns, and plates were strikingly different from their Rococo predecessors encrusted with frivolous decorations. As in several subsequent presentations, we were reminded that the discovery in the early 1700s of Herculaneum and then the 1748 unearthing of Pompeii triggered a major Western cultural revival of interest in Classical design. English potters were inspired by books illustrating the designs of ancient Roman styles, especially the four-volume set published by Sir William Hamilton, and their wares began arriving in America later in the 18th century. Even more ceramics landed here following the return of the *Empress of China* in 1785 from the first American shopping spree in Canton, opening the floodgates of Chinese porcelain (and tea) into our ports.

That evening, in the Deerfield Community Center, where we heard all subsequent lectures, Philip Zea, president of Historic Deerfield, formally welcomed us. Zea then introduced our lead-off speaker, Wendy Cooper, recently retired from Winterthur Museum. Most readers will know something of her lifetime work as a foremost scholar, curator, and author on American decorative arts. Accompanying her lecture, "From Vase Backs to Swag Backs: Classical Furniture in New England, 1785-1825," were many projected images of ancient art and architecture, some taken during her recent visit to Sicily. These were followed by examples of those designs applied to Paul Revere silver, Seymour tables and desks, and iconic Federal furniture from the Kaufman collection of American furniture at the National Gallery of Art. The donation of this premier collection provides Washington, D.C., museum-goers with examples otherwise not available, unless they have access to the State Department or White House. George Kaufman is deceased, but his widow, Linda, was with us during the weekend.

The next morning, Gordon S. Wood presented "The Revolutionary Origins of American Culture." Wood, a Brown University emeritus professor of history, is the author of prize-winning books and important articles on the American Revolutionary period. He noted that many contemporary historians share Emerson's conviction that our Revolution-era leaders were too imitative of and dependent on European cultural influences, but he disagrees. Professor Wood believes that while Jefferson and his peers embraced those principles, they sought to enlarge and enhance the ideals to apply to all people, not just to elites and royalty. Jefferson spent five years in Europe representing his homeland and on his return believed that art would transform culture, not just serve as entertainment for the rich, and would provide moral and educational inspiration to an enlightened citizenry.

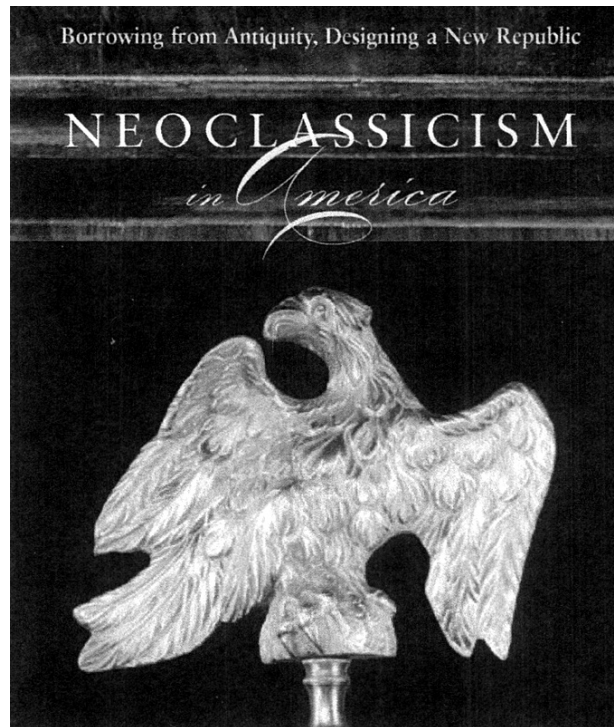
Diplomatic ministers and consuls based in Europe after the Revolutionary War imbibed Classical aesthetics and returned home with the ideals, fashions, and artifacts. Artists, such as John Trumbull and Ralph Earl, became known as teachers and philosophers advancing truth, beauty, and virtue, not just as handwork artisans. They offered historical portraits and a painted record of our Revolution, reminding viewers of its aspirations and protagonists. Prints and engravings, periodicals, exhibits, salons, and concert halls all brought refinement and culture to the rapidly expanding American middle class. Washington, D.C., rose from swampland to be the new Athens or Rome, its public buildings recalling the Parthenon, its Goose Creek renamed the Tiber.

By 1840, however, the country had turned away from the Federalists and their high-minded moralizing, and most Federalist gentlemen grew disillusioned by the advance of Jacksonian democracy. Fortunately for later generations, many of them turned from public office to private philanthropy, and their lasting contributions include the Boston Athenaeum and the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. Their influence remains far more than as a lingering homage to old European values.

George Washington, often pictured in togas and classic poses, is certainly the most iconic of our Founding Fathers and the personal embodiment of American Classical style. He devoted 25 years to the creation of Mount Vernon's New Room as a design showpiece, picture gallery, and occasional dining room. Susan Schoelwer, its senior curator, described that room's evolution. Begun in 1774, its construction and decoration



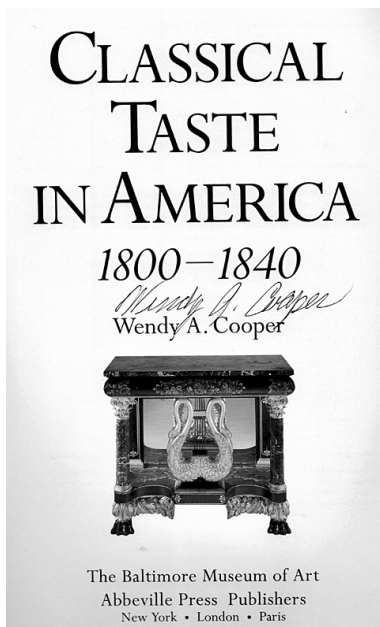
Amanda Lange, curatorial department director at Historic Deerfield, showed that Classical objects such as obelisks were popular decorative forms. This is one of a pair of circa 1800 English "feldspathic stoneware" obelisks by Chetham & Woolley of Longton, Staffordshire County. The overglaze enamel decoration depicts "trophies" of musical and military imagery.



The 2014 Historic Deerfield Decorative Arts Forum brochure detail shows the American eagle finial from Deerfield's breakfast secretary, Salem, Massachusetts, 1800-10.



George Washington designated this as New Room at Mount Vernon. Senior curator Susan Schoelwer described its design, contents, and importance. Photo courtesy Mount Vernon.



Wendy Cooper's 1993 landmark book could be the next stop for readers digging deeper into American Neoclassicism. My copy's signed title page also illustrates a high point of the style.



Asa Stebbins's clock now stands back in the room where it first counted the hours. The brass works and oversized dial are by Aaron Willard; the ornate case is attributed to Stephen Badlam.



Gordon S. Wood is the Alva O. Way University Professor and Professor of History Emeritus, Brown University. His latest book, the 800-page *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*, waits on my nightstand.

proceeded even during Washington's extended years away as general and president. Historians and restorers have benefited from those absences because Washington directed much of the work by communications from afar, and those letters still exist. We know that he had English pattern books, access to drawings and objects from his English and French friends including Lafayette, and advice from dealers who furnished his presidential quarters in New York and Philadelphia. The New Room, the place where Washington's body was laid out after his death, is freshly restored following extensive research and analysis. Today's visitors can become steeped in its Neoclassical symmetry, architecture, furniture, and artwork.

David Bosse, Historic Deerfield's librarian and curator of maps, focused his presentation on the paper maps of the post-Revolution years. Earlier engraved copper-plate maps, mostly printed in England for government and private subscribers, had ornate cartouches and flourishes. These were succeeded by plainer, more accurate ones proudly labeled as produced in America. Some maps even placed the prime meridian at Philadelphia rather than London. While most mapmakers were not financially successful and many freely copied their competitors' work, their maps and town plans had important commercial uses and also were displayed as "ornamental furniture" to indicate the owners' taste and learning. A few were originally tinted, but most probably were hand colored later to enhance their appeal.

Zea returned to the podium to speak about the Asa Stebbins clock, recently purchased at Sotheby's and returned to its first home in Historic Deerfield's 1799 brick Stebbins house. Zea described the 1799 Aaron Willard long-case eight-day clock as "fabulous," as "free-standing architecture," and its mahogany 105" tall case he attributed to cabinetmaker Stephen Badlam. It cost at least \$100 new, when an average worker's daily wage was 25¢ to 50¢, and it was a "planned acquisition," designed to display Stebbins's affluence and sophistication. Although far from Boston and one of the area's original settlers, Stebbins was far from being provincial. He grew wealthy from agricultural and industrial pursuits, and his home and furnishings, all in the latest Neoclassical style, confirmed his status.

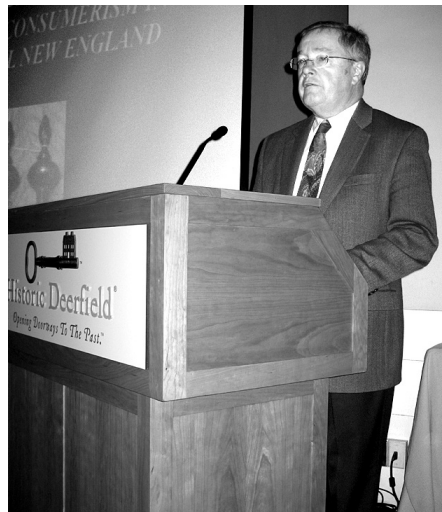
An expert on early American clocks, Zea also offered details on Aaron's brother Simon Willard, a "genius" who could "package beauty." Simon's invention, the patent timepiece known better as the banjo clock, "denied wood" and "was all about paint and glass." Stebbins's Aaron Willard clock is a rare example of a return of a cultural artifact to its original location, regaining its place as the "heartbeat of the household." Any uncertainty about whether this truly is Stebbins's clock was resolved (not only by documents and trails of ownership) as the restored clock was eased into its corner. When the installers began to secure the case to the wall through a preexisting hole in its backboard, they drilled into a filled hole in the house wall—at exactly that spot.

Saturday's final presentation was a demonstration by cabinetmaker Allan Breed of ROLLINSFORD, New Hampshire. Breed is the rare type of fine craftsman who also lectures, writes, and prepares exhibits on furniture restoration and connoisseurship. He demonstrated his carving techniques on a large mahogany bedpost, mate to one he produced some years ago for the Peabody Essex Museum. He noted that this type of carving "in the round" is easier (his word) than carving "in the flat" when the wood grain is more difficult to manage.

Breed also told us that early carvers had the advantage of working with air-dried wood, which retained a "buttery" feel not found in modern drier kiln-dried lumber. A close video camera allowed us to watch his hands and tools on a large screen, and we saw leaves quickly take shape on the curved red surfaces. Time was money in the past too, and carvers needed to proceed efficiently with a minimum number of tools and tool changes, as well as work ambidextrously as Breed does. Copying and creating carved designs requires careful advance planning, and his voice of experience also warned against designing a pattern for which no tool is handy. While carving, both hands hold the tool, one acting as the gas pedal, the other as the brake. His tools are very sharp, but he warned that cuts usually happen only when brushing away wood chips. Finally, we learned that each



**J. Peter Spang, a Historic Deerfield trustee, is shown examining a volume on display in the library named in his honor.**



**Philip Zea, president of Historic Deerfield, welcomed us all, introduced a few speakers, and delivered his own presentation on the Asa Stebbins clock, which was recently returned to its original Deerfield home.**



**David Bosse is librarian and curator of maps at Historic Deerfield. American-produced maps of the new republic appeared quickly after the American Revolution. The first with an American flag was in 1783, although it was printed in England.**

carver has a distinctive style, and an experienced eye can learn to identify a carver in the same way that a musician's style is recognizable to music scholars.

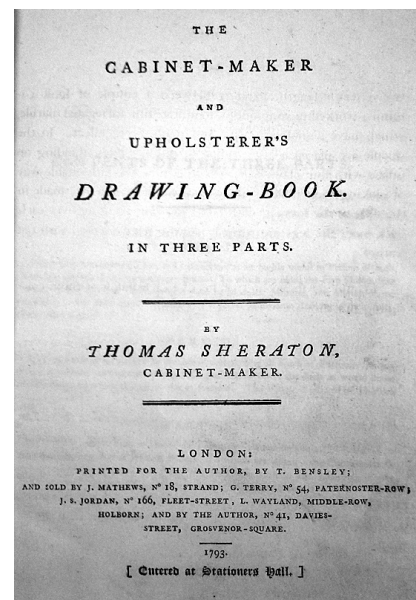
Sunday's opening presentation was the cure for anyone's morning drowsiness. William Hosley presented a high-energy lecture, "Reflections on Asher Benjamin and Neoclassicism in Early New England." An independent and published scholar who heads Terra Firma Northeast, Hosley is also well known for his past work at the New Haven Museum, Connecticut Landmarks, and the Wadsworth Atheneum. He is an expert on "heritage tourism" focusing on smaller, lesser-known historic sites. He admitted that he is particularly interested in the second of the "two New Englands," the inland and more western-looking areas rather than the seacoast communities.

Prior to the American Revolution, architects were little known and buildings were designed and built by carpenters, joiners, and housewrights. Following our independence, architects such as Asher Benjamin, designer of the original building of Deerfield Academy, trained with pattern books of Classical images and then designed buildings that reflected our new "cultural nationalism." Throughout western Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont, Hosley has documented and photographed hundreds of homes and public buildings in what he calls the "Country Palladian" style. Perhaps most important, Asher Benjamin published in 1797 the first American builder's guide, applying the Classical principles of mathematics, geometry, and science to architecture. By 1802, he had arrived in Boston, become a "society hill" builder, and never looked back. As Hosley quipped, Benjamin became "the Martha Stewart" of architecture, producing 42 editions of seven books on the subject.

Hosley then moved onto the broader subject of American Neoclassicism, a term that was not applied to the concept until later in the 19th century. He stated that it reflected the character and aspirations of the self-conscious post-Revolution generation. George Washington iconography, schoolgirl needlework, printed engravings, symbolic eagle carvings and inlay, and mourning pictures all demonstrated a hope that our nation was heir to elevated Greek and Roman ideals. New furniture forms and versions—sideboards, washstands, desk-and-bookcases, and standing clocks—proliferated in a "flaunting of geometry, symmetry, and complexity," as did gravestones. He called our New England meetinghouses "the greatest things in our world" and wondered if "maybe America peaked during this period."

Another well-known craftsman/scholar, Robert Mussey, was next with "From Ancient Greece to the Streets of Boston: Furniture-Making in Urban Massachusetts." Mussey is a published expert on John and Thomas Seymour and is now deep into a similar project on Boston cabinetmaker Isaac Vose. Greek and Latin in this period were much more familiar than today in Boston, and Classical iconography also was well understood. Neoclassical-style desks, for example, were "pieces of architecture," geometric Latin and Greek languages in three dimensions. Conversely, the Seymours are famous for complicated veneers and inlays that reduce three dimensions to two by the use of sand-scorched shadowing, "niche" and "panel" inlays, and other optical devices that convey depth and relief in place of deep carving.

Mussey cited many furniture objects in museum collections that incorporate Classical symbols and shapes—lyres, swags, garlands, urns, goddesses, chariots, etc. He explained that there really are three overlapping stylistic periods within American Neoclassicism: Federal, 1785-1820; English Regency, 1808-25; and Classical, 1813-40. The Grecian style emerged in this third period, largely driven by Napo-



**Thomas Sheraton's 1793 book is in Peter Spang's extensive collection of pattern books that greatly influenced American Neoclassical furniture makers.**

leon's French Empire designers. Greek Revival motifs were prevalent, especially favored by Boston's extremely wealthy merchant Peter Chardon Brooks, then faded as America retreated from Classicism into the individualism and romanticism championed by Emerson.

The appropriate finale was "It's All Greek to Me: Preserving the Captain Howland House," presented by Stephen Fletcher of Skinner, Inc. Lost on a house call drive to Westport, Massachusetts, he passed by this unoccupied 1830 stone house languishing and deteriorating in that town. Following a two-and-a-half-year total restoration that included demolition of an offensive addition and several dog kennels, the home now stands in its Neoclassical splendor. Passers-by continually ask "What was that," guessing that it was a bank or even a mortuary, proving that our culture today still associates that ancient style with enduring institutions.

There was a bonus postscript for a small number of us who stayed for J. Peter Spang's guided tour of the special collections room, named in his honor, in the Henry N. Flynt Library. Spang, who "really likes Palladio," has been an active supporter of Historic Deerfield for more than 50 years, and his extensive collection of early architectural and furniture pattern books is filling the room's newly installed shelves and cabinets. Several of his books, including classics by Sheraton, Hepplewhite, William Pain, James Gibbs, and others, were laid out for us to peruse, and with clean hands we turned pages. Spang pointed out his first important book purchase of 1957, when he learned that such volumes could actually be bought and owned, not just viewed in rare-book libraries. For \$8 at Goodspeed's bookshop in Boston, he bought a 1747 copy of James Gibbs's *Bibliotheca Radcliviana*, and later found additional volumes of it for even less money while he was studying in London. His continuing purchases over the next five decades now enable scholars to study the books that guided the rise of Neoclassicism in the new United States of America.

For more information and to learn about the dates and theme of this year's Historic Deerfield Decorative Arts Forum, visit ([www.historic-deerfield.org](http://www.historic-deerfield.org)).

Robert Mussey is a furniture scholar and retired conservator. His award-winning book *The Furniture Masterpieces of John and Thomas Seymour* soon will be followed by a similar study of Boston cabinet-maker Isaac Vose.



Robert Mussey provided this photo of an early John and Thomas Seymour Boston card table, illustrating its elegant, geometric Neoclassical design.



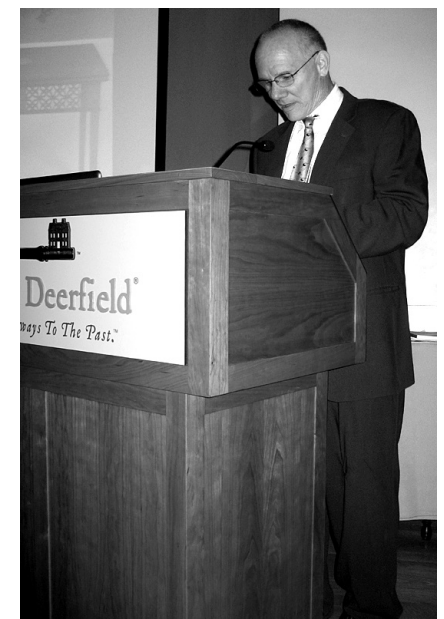
Stephen Fletcher is an auctioneer and director of American furniture and decorative arts at Skinner, Inc. From “hundreds” of photographs documenting his lengthy restoration of the 1830 Captain Howland House, he selected a half-hour’s worth to share the process of reviving this Neoclassical gem.



Acropolis Circle, Andover, Massachusetts, 2014. Neoclassical influences remain strong in New England including the town where I live. Nearby streets are Doric Way and Parthenon Circle.

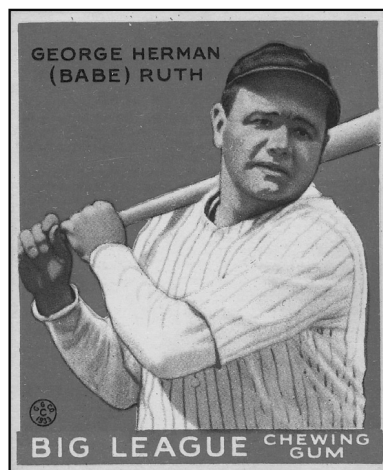


Old Main Street, Deerfield, Massachusetts.



William Hosley, principal of Terra Firma Northeast, specializes in “image-based storytelling” about New England architecture.

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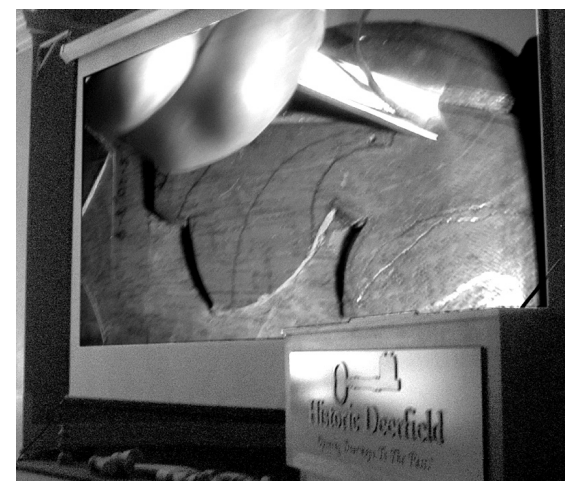
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Cabinetmaker Allan Breed’s on-screen hand and carving tool are shown at work on a mahogany bedpost. A leaf is taking shape.