

Old roots in a new ground: The wildness of the Cathey family furniture

By Michael A. Ausbon

Wild describes the unknown, the untraditional, the unfamiliar. Wild things escape our ordinary classifications. “Wildness is simply the elusive and ambiguous nature of things, the construction of meaning in a historical, cultural, and critical context.”¹ Wildness “helps the viewer look at ordinary things in a new way, making them a bit strange.”² This new look gives us an enlightening perspective and transforms our view of the maker and his work. MESDA’s Cathey chest and candlestand are examples of different conceptions of the expected classic style of a chest and candlestand. These pieces exemplify how backcountry decorative arts embody this wildness. William Cathey is said to have made this tall chest and candlestand in Rabun County, Georgia. However, it is possible he did not create them in the hinterlands of Rabun County, Georgia, but in the mountains of North Carolina.



Figure 1: Restored Cathey Tall Chest, Courtesy MESDA, Acc No 5503-2a



Figure 2: Cathey Candlestand, Courtesy MESDA, Acc No 5503-5

¹ Bernie Herman. “Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life.” Abstract. *So What is it? Material Culture Studies Unmasked*.

² Attfield, Judy. *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*. New York: Berg, 2000: 18.

Settlement and Migration of Scots-Irish

The Cathey family arrived in the American Colonies before 1719 from Ulster in northern Ireland,³ likely in Philadelphia. James Cathey, great grandfather of William Cathey, swore an oath on February 28, 1739 that “he had imported himself and his family from Ireland to Philadelphia and from thence into the colony at his own charge and that this is the first time of proving his and their rights in order to obtain lands.”⁴ The first reference to our William Cathey is in 1806.⁵

In *From Ulster to Carolina: The Migration of the Scotch-Irish to Southwestern North Carolina*, Blethen and Wood illustrate how southern Pennsylvania was not the final destination for those [like James Cathey] who arrived in the colonies from other parts of the world. Earlier settlers had staked claims to farmlands at embarkation points and secured the best proximate lands. “[S]oil exhaustion caused by . . . wasteful land use practices, an antipathy to living in growing communities, a search for even cheaper land and better climate, or some kind of culturally-induced ‘restlessness,’ [induced] significant numbers of Scotch-Irish [to sell] their lands and [join] the growing southwestward movement into the Valley of Virginia which, for some, would eventually lead to the mountains of western North Carolina.”⁶ Some settlers immigrated to the American colonies to leave “the world” and create communities of their own, such as the Moravians and Quakers. Even though people’s spirits, beliefs, and cultures spurred them on, great land speculators with the promise of expanses of cheap land greatly motivated migration. Arthur Dobbs, governor of the NC province in 1753, encouraged settlement by promising generous land grants to newcomers.⁷



Source: Cordella Camp, ed., *Influence of Geography upon Early North Carolina* (Raleigh: Carolina Charter Tercentenary Commission, 1963).

The route to these new lands was the Great Wagon Road. Not only did it serve as a means for travel and trade, it became a means of communication, a stream carrying people,

³ Wood, Curtis W. Jr. *Haywood County: Portrait of a Mountain Community a Bicentennial History*. Waynesville, North Carolina: The Historical Society of Haywood County, 2009: 25.

⁴ Macon County Historical Society and Museum. Macon County Genealogy Society pages. “The Fourteenth Annual Cathey Family Reunion.” Copyright 2005-2012. http://www.maconnhistorical.org/gen/l_wood/c_d?cathey06 .

⁵ Grant, Marty and Karla. “Marty and Karla Grant.” Copyright 1996- 2012, <http://www.martygrant.com>.

⁶ Blethen, Tyler and Curtis Wood Jr., *From Ulster to Carolina: The Migration of the Scotch-Irish to Southwestern North Carolina*. Cullowhee, North Carolina: Western Carolina University, 1983: unpaginated book.

⁷ Weekley, Carolyn. “James Gheen, Piedmont North Carolina Cabinetmaker.” (unpublished manuscript), MESDA Research Library. Winston Salem, North Carolina: 7.

lore and decorative motifs into the southern backcountry. Not all settlers moved into western North Carolina from the “Road”. Scots-Irish, German, and English settlers were also moving into the American frontier from other directions. “New settlers moved into western North Carolina from every direction--north from Georgia and South Carolina, west from North Carolina’s Piedmont counties, southeast from the Watauga settlements of Tennessee, and southwest from Virginia and Pennsylvania.”⁸ However, the Cathey family appears to have followed the traditional path of the Scots-Irish from Pennsylvania through Virginia into North Carolina and from there southwestward towards Georgia.

Backcountry Descriptions Enticing

An early traveler in 1728 described the Yadkin River Valley in Piedmont North Carolina as follows: “The soil is exceedingly rich on both sides of the Yadkin, abounding in rank grass and prodigiously large trees; and for plenty of fish, fowl, and venison, inferior to no part of the northern continent”⁹; the prodigious trees promising plenty of wood to builders and craftsmen. Frenchman-turned-American-farmer, Michel Guillaume Jean de Crevecoeur, wrote from Philadelphia in 1759,

Ye poor Europeans, ye who sweat, and work for the great--ye, who are obliged to give so many sheaves to the church, so many to your lords, so many to your governments, and have hardly any left for yourselves--ye who only breathe the air of nature, because it cannot be withheld from you; it is here that you can conceive the possibility of those feelings I have been describing; it is here the laws of naturalization invite every one to partake of our great labours and felicity, to till unrented, untaxed lands.¹⁰

These descriptions were especially enticing to restless Scots-Irish immigrants. The 1800 census recorded that, for communities west of the Blue Ridge, 40-43% of 888 families were of Scots-Irish origins. As the frontier moved west, these percentages declined. Formally settled towns became holding communities until settlers decided to move on.¹¹

Scots-Irish Culture in the Backcountry

Scots-Irish families had a great strong spirit of individuality, and their sense of family and self-sufficiency made them great candidates to help settle the wilds of western North Carolina. Even though they acquired land grants along the Great Wagon Road, they moved on to the edge of the frontier, as Blethen and Wood explain.

Two fundamental features of the Scots-Irish stand out:

1. They experienced cultural interaction throughout their migrations. They never settled in isolation from others.
2. They had a readiness to change and adopt new ideas and practices.

⁸ Wood 32.

⁹ Weekley 9.

¹⁰ Blethen unpaginated book.

¹¹ Blethen unpaginated book.

The Catheys were typical of these Scots-Irish families who followed the migration along the great wagon road, being influenced by the cultures they encountered and adapting the traditional with the new.

Resources Available to William Cathey

Settlers in the backcountry made use of centuries-old Native American trading paths. Naturally these paths would have been for foot or horse travel and not wagon travel. “[T]he route through western North Carolina [was] treacherous with rocky, poorly-maintained roadbeds and wide expanses of river impossible to cross without the aid of a ferry.”¹² These early road conditions would have limited trade and access to manufactured goods. “Recognizing the importance of access, in 1819 North Carolina created a Board of Internal Improvements responsible for infrastructure throughout the state. Primarily concerned with transportation, the Board incorporated The Buncombe County Turnpike Company in 1824.”¹³ The turnpike was completed in 1828. “The impact on Buncombe County and the region was immediate.”¹⁴ The improved road would have opened William Cathey’s access to manufactured goods exponentially, but not before 1828. “By the 1830s a stagecoach line offered service from Asheville to Waynesville, and then proceeded on to Franklin and Clayton Georgia.”¹⁵ Even though the means of travel was improving, routes remained treacherous. “The road situation in Haywood County did not change much for the most of the nineteenth century. Conditions during the winter and wet seasons continued to hinder travel for both tourists and merchants.”¹⁶ Even though new roads increased, consumers’ regular access to manufactured goods was haphazard at best, with shipping and travel impeded by natural conditions.

William Cathey also had familial resources from which he could have drawn. “These Scots-Irish did not always perpetuate the stereotype of the hillside farmer, isolated poor and proud. Many of these families became wealthy and influential leaders even two centuries after their arrival in Haywood County.”¹⁷ Joseph Cathey of Haywood County, a close relative of William, owned and operated a mill and store. He was noted as “one of the oldest and most reliable merchants” with “an excellent farm and two flour mills.” When he died in 1874, Joseph Cathey was worth approximately \$20,000 to \$25,000,¹⁸ an immense sum of money at that place and time.

William Cathey had skilled ancestors in neighboring Mecklenburg and Rowan Counties: Andrew, a weaver in 1764;¹⁹ Alexander, a miller 1766;²⁰ Archibald, a planter in

¹² Digital Heritage. “Buncombe Turnpike.” Posted in *Economy*. Last modified July 26, 2012. <http://www.digitalheritage.org/2010/08/buncombe-turnpike/>.

¹³ Digital.

¹⁴ Digital.

¹⁵ Wood 125.

¹⁶ Wood 124.

¹⁷ Wood 26.

¹⁸ Wood 231.

¹⁹ Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Deed Book 1: 567. MESDA Craftsman Database.

²⁰ Rowan County, North Carolina. Record of Wills, Volume A 1762-1780: 39. MESDA Craftsman Database.

1767;²¹ John, a gunsmith in 1797;²² Henry, a carpenter in 1850;²³ and John, a blacksmith in 1850.²⁴ The variety of family trades suggests that William Cathey descended from a family of skilled artisans. This would have afforded William the opportunity necessary to explore cabinetmaking. Even though Rowan County was a good distance from Burke or Haywood County, Cathey could have utilized his connections to trade or procure mercantile goods. “The 1790 Federal census of Rowan County listed a population of 15,000. Between 1790 and 1800 that population included at least five silversmiths, a pewterer, two gunsmiths, and many craftsmen working wood.”²⁵ “Beginning in 1850, area censuses noted occupations, giving us some insight into the locally crafted furniture trade. Before that, occupations were not listed, and few cabinetmakers signed their work. To further complicate matters, some craftsmen had other livelihoods and made furniture only as a sideline for family and friends.”²⁶ It is likely William Cathey made these items for personal use in his home and not for resale. In this environment, Cathey would have had access to

the lore, tools and hardware typically used in cabinet-making, but he produced an atypical chest and candlestand.



Figure 3: Unrestored Tall Chest, Image Courtesy MESDA Acc No 5503.2

Cathey Migration

James Cathey, great grandfather of William Cathey, arrived in Philadelphia before 1719. William Sr. was born in Augusta County, Virginia in 1741. William Jr. was born in

Burke County, North Carolina in 1782. He died before 1860 in Union County, Georgia. Their biographies followed the Great Wagon Road south and from there to the western frontier, typical, as we have seen, of Scots-Irish migration patterns (See appended Cathey Family Timeline and Migration Map). Our tall chest and candlestand remain as the by-products of this migration.

Tall chest

The tall chest is constructed of walnut with

²¹ Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Deed Book 1 : 431. MESDA Craftsman Database.

²² Rowan County, North Carolina. Court notations and Bivins, *North Carolina Gunsmiths*: 148. MESDA Craftsman Database.

²³ 1850 Census Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Steele Creek District: 7. MESDA Craftsman Database.

²⁴ 1850 Census Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Paw Creek District: 22A. MESDA Craftsman Database.

²⁵ Weekley 2.

²⁶ White, Betsey K. *Great Road Style: The Decorative Arts Legacy of Southwest Virginia and Northeast Tennessee*. Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2006: 9.

yellow pine as a secondary wood and likely dates around 1820-1840 or earlier.²⁷ Such a chest would have been used anywhere in the house although in modern times some would exile it to the back porch. “A fundamental point to remember while assigning these objects a place in . . . history is that . . . they were made to be used.”²⁸ Furniture was designed to fit the houses and to work for the people who used it.

It appears to retain its original red-wash finish, except for the base, which shows substantial surface degradation possibly due to prolonged exposure to moisture or floor-cleaning methods. “Over time oxidation and its environment will have an effect on the color and surface.”²⁹ The finish shows uneven degradation, with that of the base worn but that of the chest well preserved. The single-board top is pegged into the case sides. The single-board sides extend to the floor, lending additional support. They sustain significant splitting.

The base is constructed of three double-molded top edge pieces joined at the front by three large fox-wedged dovetails and nailed to the case. The base exhibits expressive bold decorative opposing/conjoined spurs mirrored on the side and front; however, the front decorative motifs have been broken off. These decorative motifs are bold and vibrant. Their placement makes them vulnerable to the owners’ shoes as they approach the chest. It is unusual to see all such decorative detail intact in pieces of this age. It is likely the decorative spurs were broken off due to their placement and fragility.

The chest’s maker had significant skill. “The overlapping drawer fronts are molded and scribed,” and attached to drawer “sides by three full dovetails” of varying sizes and quality of craftsmanship.³⁰ There is a decorative element to the molded edges on all of the drawers. The top and side edges of each drawer converge to form a petite square. Was this detail intentional or simply a by-product of drawer construction? “The drawer bottoms are made of tongue and groove and run from front to back.”³¹ According to Dale Couch, Curator of Decorative Arts at the Georgia Museum of Art, this technique is often English in nature,³² reflective of the Cathey’s Scots-Irish heritage. All drawer backboards are joined to the sides with hand-cut dovetails and fox wedging. “The side runners are nailed to the case and join the drawer dividers and back runner supports by tongue-and-groove joints.”³³ According to

²⁷ Atlanta Historical Society. *Neat Pieces The Plain Style Furniture of 19th Century Georgia*. Atlanta: Atlanta Historical Society, 1983. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at the Atlanta Historical Society, Atlanta, Georgia: 140.

²⁸ Smith, Jane Webb. *Georgia’s Legacy: History Charted Through The Arts*. Edited by Marianne Doezema. Athens, Georgia: Georgia Museum of Art with The University of Georgia, 1985. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens, Georgia: 19.

²⁹ *New Discoveries in Georgia Painted Furniture*. Co-Curated by Ashley Callahan and Dale Couch. Athens, Georgia: Georgia Museum of Art and the University of Georgia, 2008. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at the Phillip Henry Alston Jr. Gallery, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia: 14.

³⁰ *Neat* 140.

³¹ *Neat* 140.

³² Couch, Dale, Decorative Arts Curator, Georgia Museum of Art, email message to author July 2012 and in discussion with the author July 6, 2012.

³³ *Neat* 140.

Jeffrey Evans, auctioneer of Jeffrey Evans and Associates, some Shenandoah Valley furniture construction exhibits this technique,³⁴ a trait to be acquired as the Catheys migrated southwards. “The vertical backboards extend” flush “to the floor and are nailed top and bottom to the case and to each of the drawer runner supports with square head nails.”³⁵ This technique is not common in chest construction. It is likely to have been used to shore up the inadequate case construction and to give additional support. Inadequate case interior construction can be seen in English and southern chests.³⁶

The overall look of the chest is *retardataire*,³⁷ again reflective of the Catheys’ journey from Ulster through Pennsylvania and Virginia into North Carolina. The baroque heavier base molding differs considerably from the more delicate and later period molding below the top, which can be seen on furniture around 1830.³⁸ The wood is unusually and inconsistently thick. It is likely that the wood used in the construction was rived and then hand planed. This would account for the varying thicknesses; the measurements of the drawer blades throughout the piece vary from 1 1/8”, 1 1/16”, to 7/8” thickness. Drawer fronts vary from 1” to ¾” thickness.

Construction techniques such as large exposed fox-wedged dovetails and overall heavy construction appearance are features of Quaker and German joinery,³⁹ cultural characteristics available to the Catheys journeying through Pennsylvania and Virginia. The walnut (hardwood) wedge would provide more stability when inserted into the yellow pine (softwood) dovetail. The proportion of the chest is English in form, executed in a Chippendale style.⁴⁰ The design elements of the chest illustrate “relationships between or among objects and other aspects of the culture and society in which they exist”⁴¹ and through which the Catheys travelled. This heavy constructed chest with expressive motif may represent the practical but restless side of the Cathey family. These “memories” of converging influences manifested by craftsmen evolved into what we call backcountry style, which the Cathey pieces authentically represent.

The chest is more reflective of the female gender. Do we imagine the backcountry farmer coming in from a hard day’s work and removing his tobacco from the chest? Would he have been as careful as his wife getting out linens? Lack of staining inside the drawers yields no indication of specific items stored in the chest, very little cultural scarring has occurred to the finish underneath the lipped drawers on the blades. Wear on the sides of the lipped drawers suggests this is how the drawers were accessed; however, there is remarkably little wear considering the absence of pulls, indicative of a lighter and defter

³⁴ Evans, Jeffrey S., Principal Auctioneer and specialist at Jeffrey Evans and Associates, in discussion with the author June 28, 2012.

³⁵ *Neat* 140.

³⁶ Couch.

³⁷ Couch.

³⁸ Evans.

³⁹ Couch.

⁴⁰ Couch.

⁴¹ Krill, Rosemary Troy and Pauline K. Eversmann. *Early American Decorative Arts, 1680-1860*. New York: AltaMira Press, 2001: 7.

touch. The heaviest wear of the drawer edges is on the bottom drawer, where the most necessary and weighty items must have been stored.

The absence of drawer pulls and drawer locks invites speculation. Drawer pulls may have been cost prohibitive or simply unavailable. Since Cathey would have likely had the skill to construct simple wooden pulls, their absence may have been an aesthetic choice. The lack of drawer locks could suggest the Catheys lacked valuable household items, that such items may have been stored elsewhere in the household, that the household trusted its inhabitants and community, that the chest was located in a private area of the home, that the cost and availability of locks might have been cost prohibitive or that William Cathey again exercised his right as creator and made an aesthetic choice not to use locks.

Candlestand

The candlestand is constructed entirely of birch and likely dates from the 1820s to 1840s.⁴² It also appears to retain its original red-wash surface paint except for the one



Figure 4: Courtesy MESDA, Acc No 5503

board scrubbed top. Unlike a dowry chest, there is no special occasion to facilitate the making of this piece other than a need for a small stand to hold lighting or to function as a work stand for sewing. “The octagonal top is attached by screws to an elongated octagonal brace into which the ring turned shaft then tenons. The cabriole legs with heavy knees terminate in simple unpadded feet. The tenons of the legs are shaped as dovetails and join the slotted mortises in the shaft and are glued.”⁴³ Unlike its companion piece, the chest, the dovetailed joints are not fox-wedged.

A candlestand is equally a male and female form, even though we often think of it in the female role. It is very easy for us to imagine the lady of the house or a house servant sitting by the candlestand sewing by candlelight. The man of the house could just as easily be reading or mending, but we have traditionally thought of men at their desks with bookcases. John Jay Janney describes this in his diary:

For those who needed a better light candles were used. One would be lighted, and placed on the ‘candlestand’, around which the women would

⁴² *Neat* 163.

⁴³ *Neat* 163.

sit and sew or knit, and the men read, except my grandfather, who would have a candle for himself, hung on the back of a kitchen chair by a hook in the top of the iron candlestick.⁴⁴

In this scenario, the candlestand is the center of female activity, with the male improvising a light hung on his chair.

Products of a Novice

These two pieces indicate that William Cathey was not an accomplished cabinetmaker but rather a novice when he built them. In all fairness, Cathey was never listed in any census as a cabinetmaker; he described himself as a farmer. Historically, backcountry inhabitants did not refer to themselves as *artisans* or *craftsmen*; most identified themselves as *farmers*. “As social documents, the decorative arts can throw light on many different aspects of a culture. Viewed as products of craftsmanship, they yield at least two kinds of useful data. In terms of physical construction, they help to document the range of natural and composition materials available to the artisan In terms of manufacturing methods, the decorative arts indicate the tools, skills, and techniques known to the artisan.”⁴⁵ These pieces exhibit Cathey’s command of tools, skills, training, and techniques, but they also betray his inadequate manufacturing methods.

The chest is very striking; however, it lost some of its aesthetic beauty over time owing to construction errors. An unskillful combination of green and dry wood was used in construction. Cathy nailed along the entire length of the interior drawer rails, restricting the wood’s natural expansion and contraction. Heavy scribe lines were used to guide the placement of the drawer rails. The drying process, constant expanding and contracting, and



Figure 5: Courtesy MESDA, Acc No 5503.2

⁴⁴ Krill, Rosemary Troy and Pauline K. Eversmann. *Early American Decorative Arts, 1680-1860*. New York: AltaMira Press, 2001: 7.

⁴⁵ Fleming, E. McClung. “Early American Decorative Arts as Social Documents.” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* Volume 45 Number 2 (September 1958): 276-284. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1902930>.

interaction of the green and dry wood resulted in extensive cracking, splitting, and loss of wood. This is further illustrated at the point of construction where the drawer blades are mortised into the sides. The drawer blades were tenoned and pegged into a mortise too closely to the surface and too deeply into the side of the case. As the wood dried naturally over time and reacted with the constant expansion and contraction with the other wood, uneven pressure points formed. Cathey's drawer blade construction and incorrect use of a green and dry wood combination resulted in significant cracking, splitting and loss of wood. The unusually thick, riven and hand-planed wood, with its varying thicknesses, again shows a lack of experience. Although the evidence points to the chest being made by a novice cabinetmaker, the overall look of the chest is impressive. The story of a maker, his journey and influences is told through the completion of the chest.

The candlestand, an unassuming piece, is also intriguing. The off-center top causes an imbalance in the positioning of the legs. It is not possible to "square up" the top in alignment with the legs when placed beside a chair. The octagonal top is not proportional and is attached off-center by more than 1 5/8" in one direction and more than 1/4" in the other. The maker is using the straight lines of the single board top to accomplish part of his work. This illustrates a lack of understanding of geometry. No scribe lines help center the top on its center column.

However, there is evidence that Cathey did acquire some training in cabinetmaking. From whom we do not know; William E. Wiseman or William Pendley, both English cabinetmakers who left England in 1741 and made their way to Burke County by 1761, are possibilities.⁴⁶ The chest's fox wedging requires understanding the mechanics of dovetailing and precise cutting skills and specialized tools. Small consistent mortise pegs indicate an attention to detail and sense of aesthetic. It is likely he had access or owned some tools such as the two molding planes, smoothing planes or lathe used to turn the candlestand column. In spite of the evidence of specialized skills and tools, these pieces also preserve the mistakes of a novice cabinetmaker.

Problematic Attribution

The Cathey family chest and candlestand publicly debuted in 1983 in *Neat Pieces: The Plain-Style Furniture of 19th Century Georgia Exhibition and Catalog*. Two respected collectors of vernacular Georgia furniture, William and Florence Griffin, acquired them. On one of their weekend trips into the Georgia mountains, they selected the Cathey chest and candlestand. They were careful collectors, documenting information received from previous owners.⁴⁷ At that time, the available documentary evidence was limited to the oral Cathey family tradition. Oral evidence is important, but decorative arts historians must also consider the physical characteristics of artifacts and how they conform to other evidence and the culture in which they reside. Information on the Cathey family items was limited.

⁴⁶ Brunk, Robert S., editor. *May We All Remember Well: A Journey of the History and Culture of Western North Carolina*. Volume 1. Asheville, NC: Robert S. Brunk Auction Services, Inc., 1997: 185-186.

⁴⁷ Couch.

The Griffins noted the furniture as being made by William Cathey in Rabun County, Georgia.

On May 30, 2009 these two pieces were again in the public eye, offered up for sale at Brunk Auctions, Asheville, North Carolina.⁴⁸ Again, the only provenance known was that previously mentioned. The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts [MESDA] purchased them for exhibition in its Georgia Room. Research on the Cathey family furniture unravels the threads of a neat attribution. Looking deeper into the family history reveals that it was unlikely the furniture was made in Georgia but more likely made in the mountains of North Carolina.

It is likely the chest dates from 1820 to 1840 or earlier.⁴⁹ The candlestand also likely dates from 1820 to 1840.⁵⁰ In 1820 William Cathey (38 years old) was still in Haywood County, North Carolina. Cathey arrived in Union County, Georgia (later called Towns County in 1856), prior to 1840 and was listed in the Union County, Georgia, census of 1840. It is unlikely Cathey (now 58 years old) would have made the chest after he arrived in Georgia. The *retardataire* style of the chest does not support a strong Georgia origin. The candlestand is more likely to have been made in Georgia. Being an older man with years of life experience, it is unlikely William Cathey would have made the numerous novice mistakes in the construction of the chest and candlestand. When Cathey and his wife Elizabeth moved to Georgia prior to 1840, they would have been housekeeping together for over 35 years. By this time, the family would have acquired such necessary pieces as a tall chest and candlestand. The evidence we depend upon most for an early attribution are the features of the objects themselves.

Conclusion

The story these pieces tell is difficult to read. “Like archeologists, we try to fit objects into patterns in order to discern meaning and intent. When we find forms that are anomalous with little clear documentation, it is hard to define their meaning.”⁵¹ The Cathey pieces are family documents. “They convey to us non-verbal impressions of the past which we can utilize now or in the future.”⁵² Life in the backcountry depended on the interdependency of trade, commerce, and communal self-sufficiency. The blending of these cultures eventually became one; however, each culture retained a portion of its own identity preserved today especially in the form of their decorative arts.

This furniture has been attributed to Rabun County, Georgia. “The decorative arts of this region reveal some of the important original intent of the artist both artistically for

⁴⁸ *The Best of Georgia: The Florence and William Griffin Collection*. Brunk Auctions. Asheville, North Carolina, May 30, 2009. Auction Catalog.

⁴⁹ *Neat* 140.

⁵⁰ *Neat* 163.

⁵¹ Garrison, J. Ritchie. Review of *American Furniture 1999*, by Luke Beckerdite. *Winterthur Portfolio* Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring 2001): 49-59. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1215295> :55.

⁵² *Neat* 2.

itself as well as for the evidence it provides.”⁵³ If Cathey did make this furniture, it was likely in his earlier life in Haywood County, North Carolina, as evidenced by the contradictory combination of skilled technique, novice mistakes, and family timeline. Imagine William and Elizabeth Cathey loading a cart with their household belongings and traveling over 100 miles from Haywood County, North Carolina, to Union County, Georgia. This arduous journey illustrates the importance these pieces had to the family. They would have only taken what was deemed the necessities of life—guns, cooking ironware, crocks, bedding, livestock, a tall chest, and a chair to accompany the candlestand.

Do these pieces belong in the company of MESDA’s premiere collection of early southern decorative arts? “More than we sometimes care to admit, the questions we ask are driven by our collections and our aesthetic response to them. There, the documents and objects of wealthy people survive in greater numbers than those of poorer folk To put it plainly, most people think these [fine] objects are more interesting to look at because there is more to see and think about.”⁵⁴ The Cathey pieces are a rare example of a frontier family’s lifestyle, status, and taste. They tell a story of the non-traditional things that escape our normal classifications. Cathey’s tall chest and candlestand bear witness to the great diversity of decorative arts whose “old country” customs and ethnic backgrounds merged to create new regional identities that enrich the history of the southern backcountry we identify with today. By examining these pieces from everyday life, historians are better able to interpret the culture we live in today. We never forget our own roots. The Cathy family planted their old roots in a new ground where they ran wild.

⁵³ *New Discoveries in Georgia Painted Furniture*. Co-Curated by Ashley Callahan and Dale Couch. Athens, Georgia: Georgia Museum of Art and the University of Georgia, 2008. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at the Phillip Henry Alston Jr. Gallery, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia: 14.

⁵⁴ Garrison 56.

Cathy Migration Timeline and Migration Map

James Cathey arrives in America before 1719 from the Ulster region of N Ireland. He owned land in 1719 on the Delaware River in Cecil County, Maryland but sold it in 1719.

1724 James Cathey is in Chester County, Pennsylvania

1733 James Cathey is in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania

1738 James and relatives arrive at Beverly Manner at Catheys Creek a branch off the Shenandoah River in Orange County, Virginia (now Augusta County)

*holds a patent for 1000 acres

*serves as a captain in the Orange County Militia Guard

*attend Augusta Stone Presbyterian Church

1749 James and family appear in Anson County (now Rowan County) with a 2000 plus acre land grant

*established Cathey's Settlement, said to be the first town in North Carolina not navigable by river

*served as Justice of the Peace

*established a mill said to be the first west of the Yadkin River

*gave land to start the Thyatira Presbyterian Church, said to be the birth of Presbyterianism in North Carolina

Before 1776 William Cathey Sr. established Cathey's Fort, his residence in McDowell County, North Carolina

*William served with Brigadier General Griffith Rutherford in the Salisbury District Militia against the Cherokee. They assembled at Cathey's Fort.

*William Sr. served in the Revolutionary War. After the war, he settled in Buncombe County. His residence was called Woodlawn.

1782 William Cathy Jr. was born according to the family Bible and the 1850 census

Between 1800 to 1809 William Cathey Jr. marries Elizabeth Bryson

1806 William Jr. (24 yrs old) signs a petition for creation of a new county from western Buncombe County to be called Haywood

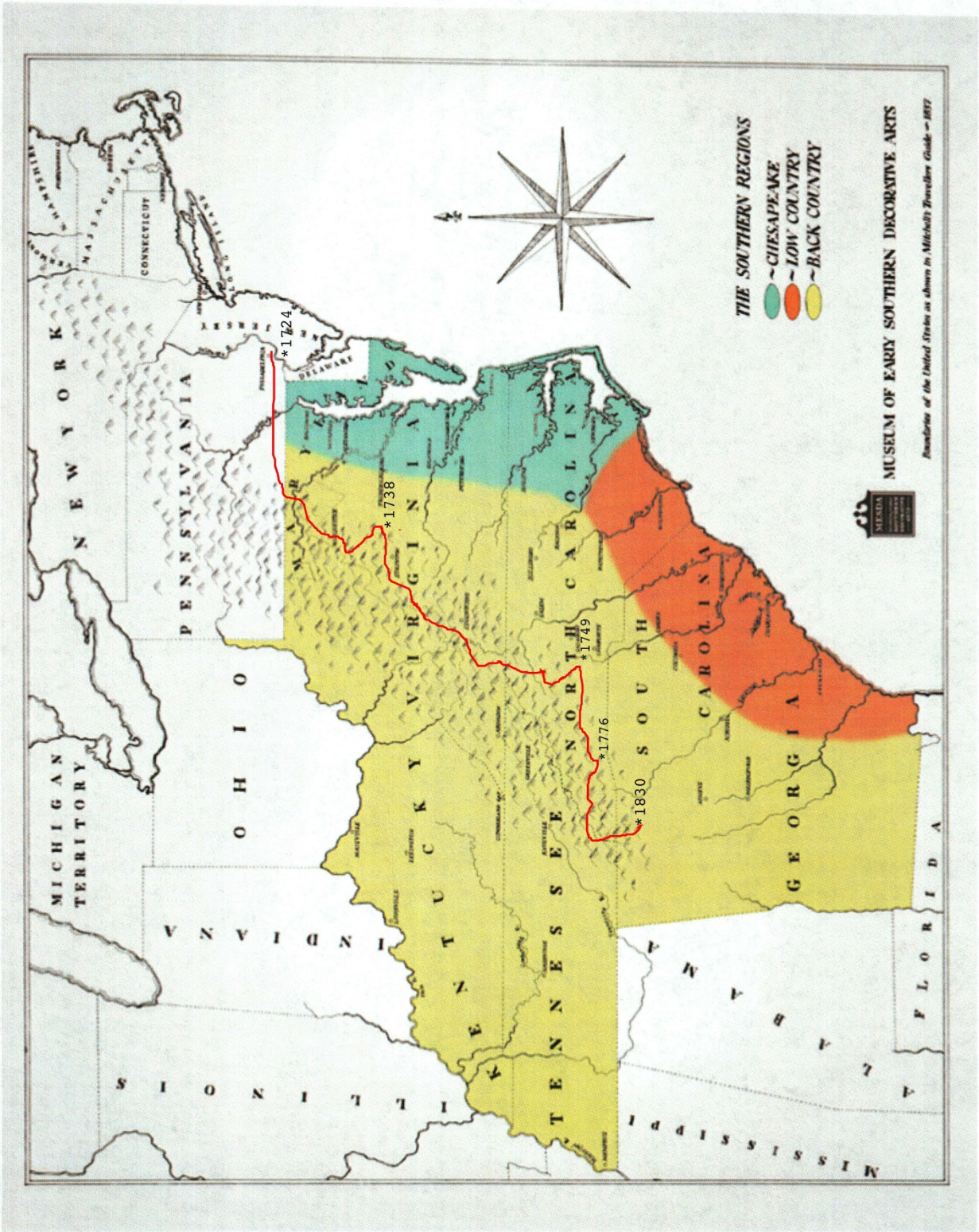
1820 and 1830 census lists William Jr. in Haywood County

Mid 1830s William Jr. moves to Union County, Georgia near the Gum Log Community later called Towns County in 1856

1840 census lists William Jr. (58 yrs old), a farmer in Union County, Georgia

1850 census lists William Jr. (68 yrs old), a farmer, and his wife in Union County, Georgia, living with son James

Between 1856 and 1860 William Jr. died. He is not listed in the 1860 census.



Bibliography

- 1850 Census Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Paw Creek District: 22A. MESDA Craftsman Database.
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