

Halifax Cabinet-Makers, 1837-1875: Apprenticeships

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Abstract/Résumé

Cette communication, qui décrit les ateliers et le travail de Thomas Cook Holder et de Henry Arthur Holder, étudie l'apprentissage en ébénisterie.

The shops and work of Thomas Cook Holder and Henry Arthur Holder are described and the process of apprenticeship in cabinet-making is discussed.

The Nova Scotia Museum collections include furniture made or used in the province. The museum also has a card index of Nova Scotia furniture makers and manufacturers with over eight hundred names listed from documentary sources. Yet there is little information about the training of these craftsmen. Recently, five examples of furniture made by Halifax cabinet-makers during their apprenticeships were added to this documentation of Nova Scotia furniture makers, and their acquisition prompted a search for information about this period of a worker's career.

Traditionally, cabinet-makers, like other artisans, learned their skills through the apprenticeship system. This system had developed in a context of domestic industry with small-scale workshops, the master often working on his own premises, assisted by his apprentices. As the eighteenth-century handcraft of cabinet-making became the nineteenth-century furniture industry, the opportunity to earn a living as a small independent cabinet-maker diminished and the apprenticeship system also began a slow decline. In the United States "self-sufficient shops capable of turning out a wide variety of products ... disappeared around 1825-1850 with the transition from craft to factory production."¹ It was in such small, self-sufficient shops that the traditional technical skills were transmitted during the long apprenticeship period of seven years.

A boy usually became an apprentice about the age of fourteen. As an apprentice, he was subject to a written agreement, called an indenture, that defined the separate responsibilities of master and learner. The duration and the conditions of the apprenticeship were specified and the boy's parent or guardian was commonly bound as a third party to the agreement.

Few apprenticeship indentures survive in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia and none has been found in the Business Archives of Dalhousie University. Most references to apprenticeships have been found among the records of societies that dealt with poor relief. Some evidence of the status of apprenticeships in Nova Scotia is given in a report

Fig. 1. Thomas Cook Holder, 1821-1894. (Private collection.)





Fig. 2. Mahogany miniature pedestal table (height 27,9 cm). Apprenticeship piece made in 1837 by Thomas C. Holder (aged 16). (Private collection.)

by Richard John Uniacke, attorney general of Nova Scotia, when he appeared before the parliamentary select committee on emigration, on 22 March 1826, in London. He stated:

"The demand for children there [in Nova Scotia] is beyond conception. If the father and mother are unable to provide for them, they can always be provided for there, because every farmer will take a child, or two or three children, from 5 to 6 or 7 years of age, apprentice, as fast as you can give them to them. As the army and navy resort to Halifax, we generally have a very large number of orphan children thrown upon the poor list, and our mode of disposing of those children is this, that at 4 or 5 years of age we put them out apprentices to farmers unless they chuse a trade; if they chuse a trade, of course they are bound to a trade ... we never can, in fact, supply half the number of children that there is a demand for. We take it month and month, acting as commissioners; and the last month I acted as commissioner, I left demands for upwards of fifty children that we could not supply, upon the books.²

This placing of poor children under apprenticeships continued as is shown by the records of the Poor House in Halifax for the period 1830-47 when over 300 children, boys and girls, are listed as being sent throughout the province as apprentices. Unfortunately the trades to which they were apprenticed are not given.



Fig. 3. Pillar and block-table made in 1848 by W.G. Anderson Jr., Halifax. (Nova Scotia Museum Collection, 80.62.)

Further references to apprentices occur in the 1871 census of Nova Scotia, which lists articted apprentices by county. The total number of apprentices was 131, with six in the city of Halifax; their trades were not specified. Apprenticeships were still being served at the Union Furniture and Merchandise Company in 1880s; the wage agreement book begun 15 March 1882 records items, such as "Bruce Urquart agrees to work 3 years as an apprentice at Painting for \$25.00 and board the first year," and "James Fulton agrees in his third year as an apprentice at painting for board and \$50.00 and ... to be allowed the privilege of fishing."³ And as late as 1884 an indenture "put, placed and bound George Shaffer aged 5 as an apprentice to a farmer until he shall come to the age of 21 years."⁴

Such scattered references as these to apprentices were found in an archival search. There does not seem to have been a legal requirement in Nova Scotia for apprenticeship papers to be registered with a government agency.⁵ Those apprenticeship indentures that survive appear to have descended in the family of the original apprentice and are found in family papers. To date only one cabinet-maker's apprenticeship indenture had been located. It is couched in traditional language, conveying a little information about the combination of learning and labour implied in apprenticeship (See note 6).

The text of the passage referring to Thomas Holder's conduct towards his master is identical to that in an indenture of Wm. Potter of Rhode Island, written in 1716, enjoining obedience and the protection of the master's interests.⁷ The master for his part is held accountable for the training and welfare of his apprentice, including his board and lodging; in the case of Thomas Holder there was provision made for him to lodge with his mother.

The provision of meat, drink, apparel, washing, and lodging is specified in some indentures. At the end of another apprenticeship, a master is "to discharge the said apprentice giving him a full, complete suit of Sunday clothes."⁸ Sometimes a stipulation about literacy was included in an indenture — the master is "to teach or cause the apprentice to be taught Reading, Writing and Arithmetic as far as the Rule of Three"⁹ or, as another indenture states "to lern him to read and write."¹⁰ In Thomas C. Holder's indentures, the boy's signature is in a clear, well-formed script showing that he had received schooling.

An apprentice would begin to acquire some tools during his apprenticeship, and to make his own tool chest may have been an early apprenticeship task. Over one hundred

tools of the Holder cabinet-makers' workshop of Halifax survive, mainly of English manufacture. A price list of tools of the period 1821-41 (the James Cam and Marshes and Shepherd Price List of Sheffield, England) shows that two shillings was an average price for a tool; the most expensive one listed was a brace of best quality for nine shillings. (These costs can be compared with the ten shillings paid weekly for Thomas Holder's board and lodging).

At the conclusion of the apprenticeship — a date that was specified precisely — the apprentice received his indentures back from his master and was then qualified to work as a journeyman, working for a daily wage or on piece-work until he had enough money to set himself up in his own business, or in partnership. He would continue to make pieces similar to those learned during his apprenticeship, a factor contributing to the long continuance of styles.

Of the daily work-pattern of apprenticeship little is recorded. The apprentice learned about materials, methods of construction, forms and proportions, and techniques of decoration by watching, assisting, and participating in his master's work. The apprentice did not receive wages — he paid for his instruction, board, and lodgings with his labour.

Fig. 4 Work-box (on table) made by Henry A. Holder, circa 1871, as an apprentice. (Private collection.)



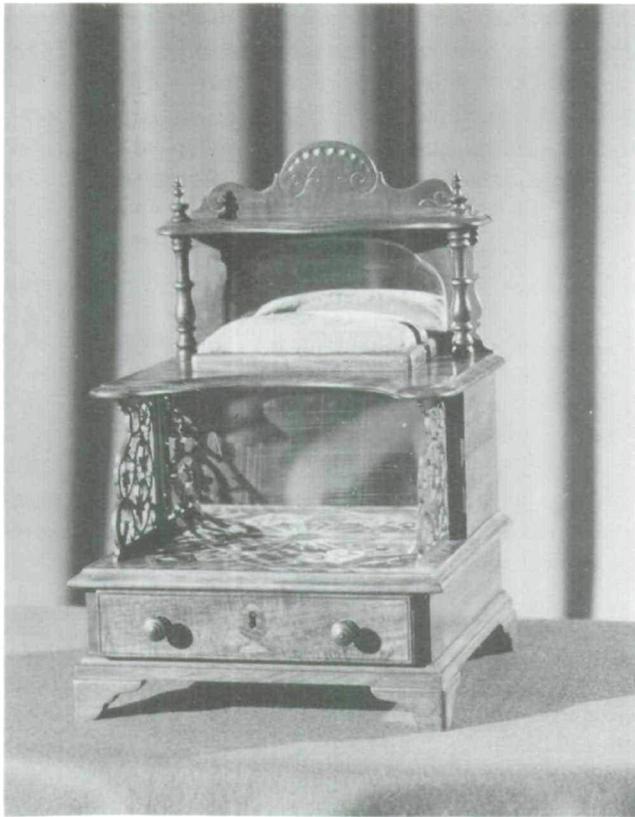


Fig. 5. Jewel-box made by Henry A. Holder (aged 21), an apprenticeship piece. (Private collection.)

Thus the apprentice learned his *trade*. In the *Dictionary of Tools Used in the Woodworking and Allied Trades, 1700-1900*, R.A. Salaman states in a note: "I have used the term tradesmen for the men engaged in these trades because that is what they call themselves. The term 'craftsman' though often used by writers is seldom heard in workshops." The word "trade" derives from "track — a habitual pattern" and in the learning of a trade an apprentice was acquiring a set of traditional skills, a habitual way of doing things, and he learned by looking and listening rather than by reading.

The standard apprenticeship training method provoked criticism in England. In *The Cabinet-Maker's Assistant* published in 1853, the anonymous writer says:

We have long been convinced that the vast majority of our artisans bestow far too little thought upon the articles which they manufacture whether as respects the materials the method or the designs. The result of this is that modes of construction, useful forms and elegant designs which have originated with the thoughtful few, are copied and re-copied by the unthinking many, without any intelligent appreciation of why this particular method of construction has been chose, why this form and proportion of parts is more suitable than another. And, as a necessary consequence, the articles thus unintelligently copied have a constant tendency to degenerate in character in the hands of the copyist.

One of the leading causes of this state of things is doubtless the imperfect training given to apprentices. It is too often the case, that while the young workman is instructed what to do, he is seldom told the reason for doing it in the way pointed out to him. Obedience is too much depended on, and thinking intelligence too little. The apprentice thus learns to perform certain pieces of work in a certain manner, and, by steady application, he becomes an active and efficient workman; but his reasoning faculties having been left dormant by his master, and he himself never having had the curiosity to acquire into whys and wherefores, he seldom attains any peculiar eminence in his trade, and rarely becomes an originator himself, or an intelligent copyist and improver of the plans and designs of others. We are glad to think, that though this is the rule, there are many exceptions; but few who have had much experience among workmen will be inclined to deny the general accuracy of these statements. But perhaps the principal cause of the state of matters adverted to, is to be found in the well known fact, that the workmen, generally, have not availed themselves to the extent they might have done, of the means of instruction actually within their reach. Mechanics' Institutes, Schools of Arts, & c. have, during the last thirty years, risen and multiplied in all our large towns, yet how small a portion of our young mechanics have taken advantage of them to acquire the knowledge of mathematics, natural philosophy, and kindred branches of study, that might, through their means, have been obtained. The elevating character of the effects produced on the honourable few who have earnestly profited by the opportunities of improvement thus afforded, make it all the more to be regretted, that a greater number have not been animated to follow their example.¹¹

The Mechanics' Institutes referred to had been formed first in Glasgow by Dr. George Birkbeck in 1823 to provide general scientific knowledge to mechanics and their apprentices. A Mechanics' Library was founded in Halifax in 1831 and, later that year, a Mechanics' Institute. Fifty volumes were purchased for the library "for the purpose of supplying useful knowledge"; unfortunately the titles of the books are not known. It is of interest to note that one of the men who founded the Mechanics' Institute was cabinet-maker James Thomson. Some furniture design books and trade manuals were available in Halifax; two copies of *The Cabinet-Maker's Assistant* have been found that were owned by Halifax cabinet-makers working in the 1850s and were presumably available to their apprentices to augment their instruction.

It appears that little information survives to record the long apprenticeships served by cabinet-makers in Nova Scotia. There are however five documented apprenticeship pieces produced by Halifax cabinet-makers in the period 1837-75. These five examples show either traditional forms or a certain design stylishness that does not have regional attributes. Each piece has some biographical context — the master of each apprentice is known and his work-place — and so they stand as records of local training in cabinet-making. The apprenticeship period shares the

anonymity of artisan life; for this reason the survival of these few pieces is worth noting.

NOTES

1. Charles F. Hummel, *With Hammer in Hands* (Charlottesville, Va: University Press of Virginia, 1968), 31.
2. G.B. Parliament *Sessional Papers*, 1826, 404.
3. Sheila Stevenson, "19th Century Furniture Makers and Manufacturers", (manuscript, Nova Scotia Museum, '979), 57.
4. Public Archives of Nova Scotia (PANS), Dawson papers.
5. Personal communication with Brian Cuthbertson, 1981.
6. "This Indenture, made this Seventh day of January in the Year of our Lord one thousand Eight hundred and thirty-seven, between Elizabeth Holder, the widow of the late Thomas Holder of Halifax, Gentleman, deceased, and Thomas Holder of Halifax, aforesaid, the son of the said Thomas Holder, and now past the age of sixteen years and upwards, of the one part and William Fraser of Halifax aforesaid, Cabinet Maker, of the other part — Witnesseth that the said Thomas Holder of his own free will and accord, and by the consent and approbation of the said Elizabeth Holder, his Mother, testified by her being a party to these presents, Hath put, placed and bound himself, and by these presents Doth put, place, and bind himself unto the said William Fraser, to learn the art, trade, and mystery of a Cabinet Maker and Upholsterer, and in all the other branches of his said business, to serve the said William Fraser after the manner of an apprentice from the day of the date hereof, for and during and until the full End and term of Four years and three Months from thence next Ensuing and fully to be Ended — And the said Elizabeth Holder for herself, her heirs, Executives, and administrators, and the said Thomas Holder, for himself, do severally covenant and Engage to and with the said William Fraser, his Executives, administrators, and assigns that he, the said Thomas Holder, during the said term of his said apprenticeship shall and will faithfully serve him, the said William Fraser, his secrets keep, lawful commands readily and cheerfully obey at all times, shall and will do no damage to him, the said William Fraser, nor see it done by others, without letting or giving Notice thereof; shall not, nor will waste his goods or property of any kind, nor lend them

unlawfully to any; and will not absent himself or depart from the Employment of him, the said William Fraser, at any time during the said term of his apprenticeship without his consent first obtained, but shall in all respects during the said term aforesaid, demean and conduct himself with integrity, diligence, temperance and propriety as such apprentice as aforesaid — And the said William Fraser doth hereby covenant and agree to and with the said Elizabeth Holder, her heirs, Executives, and administrators, and to and with the said Thomas Holder, and Each of them severally that he, the said William Fraser, during all the aforesaid Term of apprenticeship of Four years and three Months, shall and will to the utmost of his skill and knowledge use his best Endeavours to teach and instruct the said Thomas Holder in the art, trade, and mystery of a Cabinet Maker and upholsterer, and also in all the other branches connected with his business, and which he may carry on and conduct; and also shall and will pay over and allow unto the said Elizabeth Holder weekly and every week during the said term of apprenticeship the sum of ten shillings of lawful money of Nova Scotia for the board and lodging of him, the said Thomas Holder, Provided always, and it is hereby understood and agreed, that in case the said Thomas Holder shall at any time during the said Term, come to board with the said William Fraser, the said weekly allowance to her, the said Elizabeth Holder, shall be discontinued —

In witness whereof the parties to these presents have hereunto their hands and seals subscribed and affixed the day and year first above written —

Signed, sealed and delivered
in the presence of
Thos. Holder
Elizabeth Holder
William Fraser

Thomas Mackie

7. "An Indenture of 1798," *The Chronicle of the Early American Industries* XXIX (1976): 27.
8. PANS, Silas Hardy papers. MG1, vol. 161, no. 36.
9. PANS, Dawson papers.
10. PANS, Douglas papers.
11. *The Cabinet-Maker's Assistant* (London: Blackie & Son, 1853), 1.