

Cabinet-Making in Prince Edward Island

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Abstract/Résumé

Mark Butcher (1814-1885) fut l'ébéniste le plus prolifique et le plus recherché de son époque à l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard; sa production embrasse et reflète tout l'éventail des styles de mobilier au XIXe siècle. Cette étude décrit l'homme, son milieu, les caractéristiques de son métier et les influences des styles contemporains sur son art.

Mark Butcher (1814-1885) was Prince Edward Island's most prolific and influential cabinet-maker, one whose work reflected the range of nineteenth-century furniture styles. This paper portrays the man, his background, the nature of his trade, and its relationship with contemporary styles.

The manufacture of furniture was a flourishing industry in nineteenth-century Prince Edward Island. Cabinet-makers and chair-makers, as well as joiners and wheelwrights, have left a legacy of hand crafted articles for the present generation to use, enjoy, and study. Each locality had its chair-maker just as it had its blacksmith, and in the two larger centres of Charlottetown and Summerside individual cabinet-makers, as well as two or three factories, were active. Of the more than fifty cabinet-makers or chair-makers that have been identified with the furniture they made, we will examine briefly a few of the leading ones, beginning with those not well known and then going on to Mark Butcher, our most prolific cabinet-maker.

Charles Dogherty advertised in 1837 that, after working some years in the furniture trade in England and the United States, he had recently arrived to join his brother Martin in the Dogherty Factory.¹ In the early years of the Colonial Building (now Province House), Charles was paid some £500 for furniture supplied, including mahogany chairs and tables for the council chamber in 1859.²

Samuel Westacott of Little York, previously of Barnstable, England, worked in the 1830-50 period. He offered for sale "handsome sofas with brass castors, mahogany sideboards, chairs covered with haircloth" and noted that he had on hand three thousand feet of mahogany veneer.³ Westacott also worked in native woods, and a beautiful maple desk he made about 1840 for James Miller of Little York is now on display at Green Park house in Port Hill, P.E.I.⁴

John Newson's factory ranked next to Butcher's in productivity. He began operating in 1866 and only ceased when machine-carved imports put craftsmen like him out of business at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵ The names of many of Newson's employees are known and include William Teed, an upholsterer who had the pleasant habit of signing and dating pieces he upholstered. Newson supplied a large amount of furniture in a late Victorian style to patrons all over the Island.⁶

One of Newson's carvers was a talented gentleman, Robert Pyke, who had returned to Prince Edward Island after a working lifetime spent in London and Paris. Pyke afterwards had a tiny shop of his own and produced some fine furniture around 1890.

George L. Dogherty, a nephew of Charles Dogherty and a contemporary of Mark Butcher, trained in Boston, Mass., and worked in Prince Edward Island in the 1865-80 period. Although his output was considerable, he did not mark his work and only pieces held by descendants of the Dogherty family and documented by them have been identified.

The Hobbs family of cabinet-makers — John, John the younger, and James — made furniture in Charlottetown from the 1830s to the 1880s.⁷ John the younger was foreman for a time at Newson's factory and James specialized in the 1870s in making school desks.

The Wilt family were our most famous chair-makers, beginning with Barnett Wilt in the 1830s and following with William, John, Hugh, and their brother-in-law William Batchilder.⁸ There were so many Wilt chairs made

that on Prince Edward Island a Windsor chair is regularly referred to as a Wilt.

Other chair-makers of note were Thomas Abbott, a Devonshire man who immigrated to Prince Edward Island in 1830⁹; John and James Kirkland, who worked west of Summerside in the 1840-60 period¹⁰; Wm Moore of Sturgeon; John and Alexander Morrison, who practised in New Brunswick before coming to the Island¹¹; and Thomas Green, son of Saint John cabinet-maker Daniel Green, who was said to be the best chair-maker in the province.¹² The Chisholm factory in North Tryon¹³ and Comptons of Summerside also produced much worthwhile furniture over a long period.

All these, and others not mentioned, add to the total picture of cabinet-making in Prince Edward Island, but now let us focus on Mark Butcher. We emphasize Butcher because there are more stamped pieces of his manufactory to study than of any other artisan and because his work spans a period of fifty years and therefore gives a good overview of the progression of styles in the Victorian period.

In 1829, as a boy of fifteen, Mark Butcher came to Prince Edward Island from St James, Suffolk County, England, with his parents and grandparents.¹⁴ In later years, newspaper accounts of his factory stated that he had been in business since 1830, but if so he probably worked with his father William, a joiner.¹⁵ The first advertisement of Butcher's own workshop appeared in February 1836 when he announced that he had begun woodworking and turning in its various branches and solicited public patronage.¹⁶

Mark Butcher was honest, respectable, religious, hard-working, and community minded. He was a member of the Charlottetown City Council from 1864 to 1869,¹⁷ an elder of the Methodist church, and an active member of that important adult education society, the Mechanics' Institute.¹⁸ He gives the impression of being a slightly dour man, an impression suggested by his newspaper advertisements which admonish customers to "Pay up or ELSE," but this probably reflects the mid-nineteenth century more than Butcher himself. Perhaps I am influenced by the fact that two of his apprentices ran away, but that happened frequently too.

At least two ladies did not find him dour. His first wife was Margaret Chappell, granddaughter of Benjamin Chappell, a wheelwright who kept a diary from the time he arrived on the Island in 1775.¹⁹ Mark Butcher's second wife was Catherine Hooper of Bedeque.²⁰ He had thirteen children in all, and his life must have been saddened by the deaths of many of them. In fact, only one child of his first marriage, the eldest son, James Mark, was still alive when Mark Butcher himself died, and that son was estranged from his father. It is a sad story but not an uncommon one in nineteenth century America.

Mark Butcher lived in a happy time as far as cabinet-making was concerned, when "encourage home manufacture" was at its height. Politicians and the newspapers continually exhorted citizens to support local mechanics, and in Butcher's case the admonitions appear to have been heeded. Government led the way by employing him to furnish the Central Academy in 1848 and the Prince of Wales College in 1862, as well as having him supply the government offices, items for Government House, and the education office.²¹ Butcher was in business during Prince Edward Island's extraordinary economic prosperity of the 1855-65 period, and he was patronized by all classes of society. In a newspaper advertisement of the 1880s, prices on sets of furniture were quoted from \$15 to \$400, which suggests that his furniture was available to persons with a low income.²² But there is also evidence that even wealthy citizens felt Butcher's work of sufficient quality to merit their patronage; Mark Butcher pieces can be found in the collections of the Peake, Douse, Longworth, Yeo, and Owen families, shipbuilding and shipowning families whose vessels regularly went to more fashionable centres.

Butcher began in business in a small way, but it is known that he had apprentices since two ran away; Butcher advertised a one-penny reward for the apprehension of one and warned anyone against harbouring the other.²³ His factory was run by horsepower until 1867 when he was forced by increased business to install steam machinery.²⁴ At that time there were nine benches for carvers in the workshop; there was a machine for horizontal boring, for making dowels, for making Venetian blinds, and a lathe for Elizabethan turning. There was an upholstering apartment, one for varnishing and polishing, and his undertaking business was in a wing of the building.²⁵

In this Charlottetown factory furniture was made for the local trade, for export, and for two branch stores. An advertisement in the *Weekly Examiner* of 18 March 1881 reads: "None but the best material is used and that the furniture gives satisfaction is proved by the ready sale it commands in the markets of Newfoundland and New Brunswick, as well as at the branch stores in Georgetown and Cardigan." At the same time Mr Easton of Georgetown was advertising that he sold all Mark Butcher furniture.²⁶ Butcher exhibited at the local exhibitions, usually winning first prize in various categories, and his work was also part of the contingent sent to England for the 1862 exhibition.²⁷

What was produced at the Butcher factory, where at times some forty men were employed? Furniture for every room in the house was made there, including some less obvious pieces, such as loo tables, picture frames, ladies work-tables, butlers' trays, bidets, bootjacks, snuff boxes, venetian shades, washing-machines, office, school, and church furniture, and croquet sets.²⁸ According to an advertisement in the *Islander* of 13 February 1857, figure-heads were carved at the Butcher factory: "The subscriber ... announces to the Public that he is still working at his

trade of Carving in Mr. Butcher's Cabinet Factory ... Ship's heads, Furniture Ornament and Fancy Carving done to order on short notice. One Female Figure Head now on hand. [signed] Henry T. Hart, late of Beverly, U.S." Butcher also made what was called a "handsome drafting machine for tailoring" for the inventor D. MacKinnon, a reaping and blowing machine called Island Champion, and of course, coffins.²⁹ He built railway cars in another factory.³⁰

The Butcher factory used native woods, such as bird's-eye, plain, and curled maple, birch, pine, and ash, as well as the imported woods, rosewood, zebra, satin, mahogany, and black walnut.³¹ He also used many types of veneers over pine cases. In style, Butcher began in the transition period between Regency and Victorian, but such stylistic nomenclature is modern and Butcher, like other contemporary cabinet-makers, simply referred to a piece of furniture as being made in the Grecian, Elizabethan, or the French style.³²

At one time any well-executed piece of furniture was said to "have come out from England, you know." As regional furniture began to be studied, it was found that contrary to the made-in-England theory, many fine articles were Canadian made. We have now almost gone to the other extreme, and sometimes claim for a craftsman all pieces made in a particular style. Most cabinet-makers copied. Butcher and other cabinet-makers in the colonies would have been familiar with Thomas Hope's *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration*, published in 1807, George Smith's *Cabinet-Maker's & Upholsterer's Guide* of 1826, John Hall's *Cabinet Maker's Assistant* of 1840, and Blackie & Sons' *The Cabinet-Maker's Assistant*, published in 1853.

Butcher could have been influenced by some or all of these, but two he appears to have known well were John Claudius Loudon's *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm, & Villa Architecture and Furniture*, first published in 1833, and A.J. Downing's *Architecture of Country Houses* with its section on furniture. Both books were sold in Charlottetown and some articles of Butcher furniture are similar to illustrations in them.³³

Yet in spite of copying and using the same prototypes, cabinet-makers had their own variations and thus regional differences occur. When studying furniture books one can see that many pieces of furniture are similar in each province but some furniture, familiar in one province, is not found in another at all. Workmanship, too, varied and helps to identify a craftsman. Two chairs of Mark Butcher in particular show a personal touch. These were made in great numbers and are characterized by a crossbar not seen elsewhere.

Butcher also produced in quantity variations of the Greek-inspired chair shown by Thomas Hope, though he usually made it with a turned leg. He copied, as we have

said, many Loudon designs in the Grecian or modern style and some with a gothic feeling. Certainly his and other cabinet-maker's furniture is similar to that shown on trade cards of upholsterers whose names are unknown. He made articles in the "new" Elizabethan style, and also cottage furniture (spool beds, etc.) with "Elizabethan" turning which did not resemble very closely the heavily carved furniture used during Elizabeth I's reign. Following the taste of the times, he made sets of furniture, rather than the earlier individual pieces, vaguely inspired by Louis XV furniture. These rococo revival sofas and easy chairs are the pieces of furniture Butcher described as being in the French manner. Some of his furniture, again harking back to the Elizabethan period, was in the Renaissance revival style, and we particularly think of sets of bedroom furniture in this mode. Butcher's last advertisements offered Grecian, French, easy, and antique chairs, and parlour sets in the French, American, and Turkish styles. With this assortment, he had every reason to assert that his furniture was the most fashionable that could be procured.

Mark Butcher's importance to the furniture picture of Prince Edward Island rests not only on what he produced but in the apprentices he employed. A brother-in-law, George Doull, worked with him before setting up on his own in Wilmot and Summerside.³⁴ Duncan Livingston's furniture is proudly kept by relatives and others,³⁵ and finally Mark Wright, Mark Butcher's nephew, took over the business on Butcher's death in 1883 and supplied furniture made on the premises until the age of locally made furniture ended.³⁶ These and other apprentices moved to various parts of Prince Edward Island to continue a tradition of good cabinet-making that produced many pieces of fine furniture.

NOTES

1. *Royal Gazette* (Charlottetown), 12 December 1837.
2. P.E.I., House of Assembly, *Journal*, 1860, app. M.
3. *Royal Gazette*, 4 February 1834.
4. The desk is displayed courtesy of Mrs. Ruth Henderson, Sackville, N.B., great-granddaughter of James Miller. A note in a drawer states the maker.
5. *Weekly Examiner* (Charlottetown), 9 April 1866.
6. *P.E.I. Calender*, 1865, 78; P.E.I., House of Assembly, *Journal*, 1870, app. P; *Examiner*, 1 May 1876.
7. *Royal Gazette*, 7 March 1837, 6 March 1840; *Ross's Weekly* Charlottetown), 20 July 1859; *Examiner* (Charlottetown), 18 April 1879, 23 September 1867.
8. Supreme Court of P.E.I., Estates Division, liber 10: f. 36 (will of Barnett Wilt); *McAlpine's Directory*, 1870.
9. Public Archives of Prince Edward Island (PAPEI), Land Registry Records, liber 81: f. 643 (August 1830); *Weekly Examiner*, 17 October 1879; *Royal Gazette*, 21 February 1832, 17 July 1838.
10. *Royal Gazette*, 22 April 1845; PAPEI, Census, 1861, lot 4.
11. *Royal Gazette*, 29 March, 1 April, 10 June 1834.
12. *Colonial Herald* (Charlottetown), 17 September 1842; *Examiner*, 23 February 1874.

13. "North Tryon History" (1973).
14. Prince Edward Island Heritage Foundation, Mark Butcher (Diary) Notebook.
15. *Weekly Examiner*, 18 March 1881.
16. *Royal Gazette*, 23 February 1836.
17. PAPEI, Charlottetown City Council, Minutes.
18. *Examiner*, 3 January 1859.
19. *Royal Gazette*, 12 January 1836.
20. *Islander* (Charlottetown), 6 July 1849.
21. P.E.I. House of Assembly, *Journal*, 1848, app. J; 1862, app. B, no. 1704; 1863, warrant book, no. 1305; *Examiner*, 12 April 1878.
22. *Examiner*, 18 March 1881.
23. *Royal Gazette*, 17 July 1838; *Colonial Herald*, 26 September 1840.
24. *Islander*, 1 February 1867.
25. *Ibid.*, 15 February 1867; *Weekly Examiner*, 18 March 1881.
26. *Patriot* (Charlottetown), 24 July 1880.
27. *Ibid.*, 15 October 1870; P.E.I., House of Assembly, *Journal*, 1862, 112.
28. *Haszard's Gazette* (Charlottetown), 7 June 1856; *Weekly Examiner*, 15 May 1865, 5 July 1878; *Patriot*, 6 March 1869.
29. *Examiner*, 24 April 1876; *Islander*, 19 June 1868; *Weekly Examiner*, 12 July 1880.
30. *Island Argus* (Charlottetown), 11 August 1874.
31. *Haszard's Gazette*, 7 June 1856; *Islander*, 1 February 1867.
32. *Weekly Examiner*, 15 May 1865.
33. *Islander*, 22 January 1847; *Haszard's Gazette*, 29 November 1856.
34. *Patriot*, 13 October 1870; *Examiner*, 12 October 1874.
35. *McAlpine's Directory*, 1887-88; Interview with Mrs. E. Anderson, 1977.
36. *Examiner*, 12 June 1883; *Guardian* (Charlottetown), 10 April 1891; *Weekly Examiner*, 12 June 1891.