



Furniture making in Massachusetts:

The furniture craftsmen of colonial Massachusetts have left a remarkable legacy. Thousands of examples of their work survive, serving as sources of enjoyment for collectors and curators alike. Yet these objects also offer intriguing challenges. Since few are signed by their makers, it is often difficult to link a particular artisan to a specific item. The process can be a slow meandering one as the researcher collects evidence and, like a detective, assembles a compelling case of circumstantial proof. The timing is completely unpredictable. After years of research, the catalogue for the exhibition *Harbor and Home: Furniture of Southeastern Massachusetts, 1710–1850*, which runs through May 25 at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware, had finally gone to press, when several more pieces fell into place about two important groups of furniture from the region.¹ We present those recent findings here.

The name of the artisan behind the first group remains a mystery, although his furniture is readily

Two Plymouth County discoveries

identifiable. The largest cache resides in the Spooner House in Plymouth, acquired by the merchant Ephraim Spooner (1735–1818) upon his marriage to Elizabeth Shurtleff (1737–1818) in 1764. The

*By Brock Jobe
and Gary R.
Sullivan*





New England cabrioles; a crease runs across the outer edge of the knees. In addition, the drawers are aligned in a single tier, rather than the customary two-tiered arrangement on cabriole-legged examples, and the tabletop is bordered by distinctive

Facing page: Figs. 1, 1a. Dressing table, Plymouth, Massachusetts, 1760–1775. Mahogany and white pine; height 30 3/8, width 34 7/8, depth 20 7/8 inches. Plymouth Antiquarian Society, Massachusetts; photographs by Laszlo Bodo.

This page: Fig. 2. Drop-leaf table, Plymouth, 1760–1775. Mahogany, maple, and white pine; height 26 3/8, width 15 1/2 (closed), 43 7/8 (open), depth 44 inches. Plymouth Antiquarian Society; Bodo photograph.

Figs. 3, 3a. Desk, Plymouth, 1760–1775. Black walnut, maple, and white pine; height 40 3/4, width 35 1/2, depth 18 inches. Plymouth Antiquarian Society; photographs by Matthew Buckley.

house and its contents descended through the family for two centuries, and today, administered by the Plymouth Antiquarian Society, is the only eighteenth-century structure in southeastern Massachusetts retaining most of its early furnishings.²

Although incomplete, Spooner's estate inventory portrays a well-furnished household, with objects ranging from a "Case Draws" valued at only one dollar to a "Looking Glass (large)" appraised at eleven dollars.³ The majority of the furnishings have modest values, suggesting that they were older items, perhaps acquired during the decade after the Spooners were married. Five of these—a dressing table, drop-leaf table, desk, blanket chest, and bottle box—are attributed to a single cabinetmaker, and they provide a framework for identifying his work. The dressing table (Figs. 1, 1a), likely the "dress Table" valued at two dollars in the inventory, follows Boston area fashion in its basic outline—cabriole legs, cup-shaped round feet, and undulating skirt punctuated by turned pendant drops. Yet closer inspection discloses several distinctive features. The skirt outline is surprisingly busy and the original acorn-shaped drops are unusually small. The legs are slightly stiffer and the ankles thicker than many





molding. The drawer construction is proficient but not exceptional; broad dovetails bind the corners, and the bottom slides into grooves in the sides and front. The maker marked the back of each drawer in chalk with a number and a V, which serve as a virtual fingerprint of his hand.⁴

His drop-leaf dining table (Fig. 2) is a classic mid-eighteenth-century New England example, with cabriole legs, pad feet, shaped end rails, and rounded leaves. Looking carefully, however, one finds that the angular legs match those on the dressing table and that the scalloping of the end rails resembles the skirt of that table. When constructing the dining table, the maker took several steps to reduce its final cost. He carved a vertical bead on the outer edge of each knee rather than apply a separate knee bracket. He mixed the primary woods, choosing costly Caribbean mahogany only for the top and leaves and native maple for the legs and end rails, which he stained to match the mahogany. Four other tables, two of which descended in Plymouth families, nearly match the Spooner table.⁵

The desk resembles many eastern Massachusetts models in its overall design (Fig. 3) and interior layout (Fig. 3a). Yet, like the two Spooner tables, it varies in subtle ways from its urban counterparts, including the shapes of the turned pilasters of the interior and of the vertical partitions between the pigeonholes. For the valances of the pigeonholes, the maker repeated in smaller scale the shape of the end rails of the dining table. He trimmed the cost of the table by limiting the use of imported black walnut to the facade and substituting less expensive native maple for the sides. He also eliminated carved details, such as the fanlike shells that often decorate small drawers in Boston desk interiors.⁶ Finally, rather than bind the front bracket feet with a typical miter joint, he fastened them with a rabbet joint

by cutting a notch in the front facing of each foot and butting it against the side, a technique common on blanket chests. Indeed, he

used it on two blanket chests, one in the Spooner House and the other, in far better condition, in the John Alden House in Duxbury, just north of Plymouth.

Perhaps the rarest survival from the Spooner House is a bottle box—with partitions for a dozen bottles (Fig. 4). Though European examples of the form, usually replete with liquor bottles, reached American ports during the eighteenth century, few versions made in New England are known.⁷ This example in black walnut, dovetailed at the corners and standing on bracket feet, is surprisingly stylish. It presumably once stood in the parlor, or perhaps the parlor closet: the estate inventory of a Plymouth neighbor, William Watson (1730–1815), recorded “1 Case & 6 empty Bottles” in the parlor closet in 1815.⁸ The feet of the Spooner box have been reduced in height. Yet enough of the feet and central drop survive to indicate that they conform, on a smaller scale, to similar details on the desk.

Fig. 4. Bottle box, Plymouth, 1760–1775. Black walnut and white pine; height 12 3/4, width 15 3/4, depth 12 inches. *Plymouth Antiquarian Society; Bodo photograph.*

Figs. 5, 5a. High chest of drawers attributed to Elisha Cushing Jr. (1746–1829), Hingham, Massachusetts, 1790–1800. Cherry, maple, birch, sycamore, and white pine; height 84, width 42 3/4, depth 20 1/4 inches. *Private collection; Buckley photographs.*



Furthermore the profile of the molded edge of the top corresponds to that along the top of the dressing table. No furniture by other Massachusetts cabinetmakers displays these same features. All the Spooner furniture was undoubtedly made by the same craftsman; but who was he?

At the time that the Spooners bought their furniture, a handful of artisans practiced their trade in the Plymouth area. The best known is Ebenezer Robbins (c. 1735–1799), whom period accounts consistently identify as a chairmaker.⁹ Between 1771 and 1785, Robbins sold at least six dozen chairs to Spooner for shipment as venture cargo on coastal schooners. The same records refer to two obscure Plymouth craftsmen, Ebenezer's brother Rufus Robbins (1729–1796) and James Shurtleff (possibly 1745–1832). In 1773 both men provided desks for export on one of Spooner's vessels.¹⁰ It is tempting to attribute the Spooner case furniture and its relations to Rufus Robbins or Shurtleff, who was in fact the half brother of Spooner's wife. However, little hard evidence has been discovered to support the theory. It is hoped that the furniture illustrated here will bring to light additional pieces, as well as clues that will confirm the name of the maker.

The identity of another Plymouth County craftsman has proved almost as elusive. His story begins with the high chest in Figure 5, discovered by the authors as *Harbor and Home* was nearing publication. At first glance, no student of early American furniture would associate the chest with southeastern Massachusetts. The steeply pitched pediment (see Fig. 5a), inlaid fylfot in the center of the pediment, stop-fluted pilasters on the upper case, and fluted plinths all relate to the furniture designs of New London County, Connecticut.¹¹ The shape of the legs, profile of the skirt, and fanlike carved shells correspond more closely to Boston and North Shore work than to that of coastal Connecticut; and still other details defy any regional attribution: the peculiar turned bases supporting brass clock finials, rather than the standard urn-and-flame wooden ones, and the unusual construction behind the scrolled pediment rather than a closed bonnet (see Fig. 5a).

Had it not been for the history of this distinctive high chest we might well have overlooked it. It belonged to Caleb William Prouty (1810–1876), a prominent mid-nineteenth-century merchant of Scituate, Massachusetts, and probably stood in his grandfather's house in that town.

Fig. 6. Desk-and-bookcase attributed to Elisha Cushing Jr., 1790–1800. Cherry and white pine; height 89 (excluding finials), width 37 ¾, depth 18 ½ inches. *Hanover Historical Society, Massachusetts; Buckley photograph.*



All the Spooner furniture was undoubtedly made by the same craftsman; but who was he?

Close inspection of the group of clock cases discloses a host of features that tie them together

The history spurred a search for related examples. We found another high chest from the same shop that descended in a Marshfield, Massachusetts, family,¹² and

a desk-and-bookcase by this maker that was acquired by a Hanover, Massachusetts, doctor before 1900 (Fig. 6). All three towns—Scituate, Marshfield, and Hanover—abut one another, suggesting that a single craftsman in the area made these objects.

In *Harbor and Home* we ended the story of these peculiar case pieces by simply identifying their connection to the region, but recent study of several clock cases from Plymouth County extends our understanding of the group. All the pieces can now be ascribed to the cabinetmaker Elisha Cushing Jr. of Hingham, a prosperous community bordered by Scituate and Hanover. The attribution to Cushing is based on two factors: the presence of the same idio-

syncratic design and construction elements in the case furniture and several of the clocks, and the relationship between these clocks and a group of later Federal clock cases made by Cushing's son Theodore. Analysis of all these clock cases, and the works within them, documents the connective threads that tie the entire group together.¹³

Like the Prouty high chest, one of the clocks was initially attributed to coastal Connecticut because of the inlaid fylfot and steeply curved pediment (Figs. 7, 7a). Indeed, the pediments of the chest and the clock are nearly identical and the shape of the cornice moldings is the same; a carved sunburst with a central button decorates each rosette; and fluted pilasters are set just below the cornice. Such consistencies point to a single craftsman.

The works of the clock can be attributed to John Bailey II of Hanover, the most significant clockmaker in southeastern Massachusetts at the end of the eighteenth century. His hand is visible in the pierced pattern of the "skeletonized" brass plates within the works (since brass was costly Bailey cut away any extraneous metal for reuse in another movement; see Fig. 7b).¹⁴ The plain geometric white dial from Boston was at the height of fashion in the 1790s,¹⁵ as were the neoclassical urn-shaped wooden finials. The case,



This page:

Figs. 7, 7a. Tall-case clock with works attributed to John Bailey II (1751–1823) of Hanover, and case attributed to Elisha Cushing Jr., 1795–1800. Cherry and white pine; height 83, width 21, depth 10 ¾ inches. *Private collection; Buckley photographs.*

Fig. 7b. Detail of the "skeletonized" clock plates attributed to John Bailey II, 1790–1795. Brass and bell metal; height of plates 6 ½, width 4 ¾, depth 2 ¾ inches. *Private collection; Buckley photograph.*

Facing page:

Figs. 8, 8a. Tall-case clock with wooden works by John Bailey II and case attributed to Elisha Cushing Jr., c. 1780. Engraved "John Bailey/HANOVER" on the disk above the face of the composite brass dial. Cherry and white pine; height 88 ¼ (excluding finials), width 20 ¾, depth 11 ¼ inches. *Private collection; Buckley photographs.*

Fig. 9. Tall-case clock with wooden works by John Bailey II and case attributed to Elisha Cushing Jr., 1780–1790. Engraved "John Bailey/HANOVER" on the sheet-brass dial. Cherry and white pine; height 86 (including finials), width 20 ¾, depth 11 ½ inches. *Hanover Historical Society; photograph by Gary R. Sullivan.*

Fig. 10. Tall-case clock with works by John Bailey II and case attributed to Elisha Cushing Jr., 1790–1795. Engraved "John Bailey/HANOVER" on the sheet-brass dial. Mahogany and white pine; height 88 ½, width 20, depth 10 ½ inches. *Private collection; Buckley photograph.*

however, is far from fashionable. The arched hood door, scrolled pediment, squat base, and bracket feet were seen on clock cases from Boston and Newport by 1760, though here the maker transformed the urban model into a pleasing, if idiosyncratic, form.

The earliest clock case that can be ascribed to him contains wooden works and a composite brass dial (Fig. 8). Before assembling the clock, the maker of the works used the pine board backing the dial as a support when figuring accounts; the pressure from his writing implement telegraphed through the paper and left faint impressions in the soft wood. One inscription reads, "Hanover/ May ye 11 1780 / Jn Bailey / of / Hanover / clock maker," dating the case to about 1780, much later than its design would suggest. In addition, the indented signature is consistent with John Bailey II's handwritten signature, strengthening the attribution of the works to him rather than to his father, who has historically been credited as the maker.¹⁶ Two features immediately set this early example apart from the clock discussed previously. The case never had feet, but instead rests on a bold base molding; and broad fluting extends up the sides of the waist. Both details add to a dramatic overall presence. Like many of the clocks in this group, the cherry case is grain-painted to simulate mahogany.¹⁷

The next clock (Fig. 9) has an engraved sheet-brass dial, a type that came into common use in the United States during the 1780s but soon gave way to the painted dial. When compared to other New England clocks, the case appears to have an exceptionally short base, but no alterations have been made, and the unusual ogee feet are original.¹⁸ The base of the clock in Figure 10 is taller, consistent with the proportions of clocks made after 1790. Its ogee bracket feet are less awkward than those on the previous example, but are not as graceful

as those on the clock in Figure 7 or on the final clock in the group (not illustrated), which is in a private collection. It is nearly identical to the one in Figure 7, but displays a better balance between the hood, waist, and base, making it the most sophisticated of the group, and with its painted neo-classical dial, taller base, and graceful ogee feet, also the latest, dating from about 1800.

Close inspection of the entire group of clock cases



discloses a host of peculiar features that tie them all together, particularly their hoods. On nearly all, the maker used two boards, one on top of the other, to construct each side of the hood, an unusual technique that has no apparent benefit (see Fig. 8a). In addition, he consistently built a larger box for the hood and cut away the front corners to accommodate the pillars, instead of the more typical technique of using a wide molding at the base of the hood that allowed space for pillars at the front and back. This too was a time-consuming process that has no obvious advantages and seems to be a quirk of this particular artisan. He took an equally individual approach on the pillars, turning them on a lathe and then decorating them with fluting or a spiral twist. He frequently cut crescent-shaped piercings in the facade of the pediment, and, to cap the hood, he added wooden finials of various shapes, ranging from an unconventional ball and twisted flame (see Fig. 10) to an urn (see Fig. 7). In virtually every case, he covered the finials (and sometimes the rosettes) in gold paint, rather than more expensive gold leaf.

The key to this idiosyncratic maker's identity lies in the similarities between the two latest clock cases in the group (see Fig. 7) and examples associated with the Hingham cabinetmaker Theodore Cushing. Cushing's name appears in the account book of Calvin Bailey, (a brother of John Bailey II), who in 1806 noted that he had paid Cushing five dollars for a "small clock case."¹⁹ Called dwarf clocks today, "small" clock cases were half-scale versions of tall clocks and were popular in Hanover and Hingham during the 1810s and early 1820s. Cushing and Calvin Bailey's 1806 collaboration was one of the earliest (Fig. 11). The cabinetmaker made numerous tall clock cases for Bailey as well (see Fig. 13). Both versions share many features—all unusual for eastern Massachusetts clocks: similar heavy fretwork caps the hoods; the dial doors have molded edges along both their inner and outer edges; and neither case was reinforced with glue blocks.²⁰ Most important, the feet on both are shaped identically (though on a

smaller scale for the dwarf clock), and they are exactly like those on the otherwise very dissimilar clock in Figure 7 (see Fig. 12). The particular profiles of the moldings around the base, cornice, and bottom of the hood of the Cushing tall clock also match those on the one in Figure 7.²¹

Could the cases of that clock and Cushing's be by the same person? Born in 1776, Theodore Cushing presumably did not begin to work on his own until 1797, when he reached the age of twenty-one. That most of the examples in the group were constructed well before that date suggests that he was not the maker. Instead, they were probably the work of the man who trained him, likely his father, Elisha Cushing Jr. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to attribute the traditional furniture in this group (see Figs. 5–10) to Elisha, with his son later adopting many of his techniques and melding these with



the new, more fashionable neoclassical style in the cases he made for Calvin Bailey's clockworks (Figs. 11, 13).

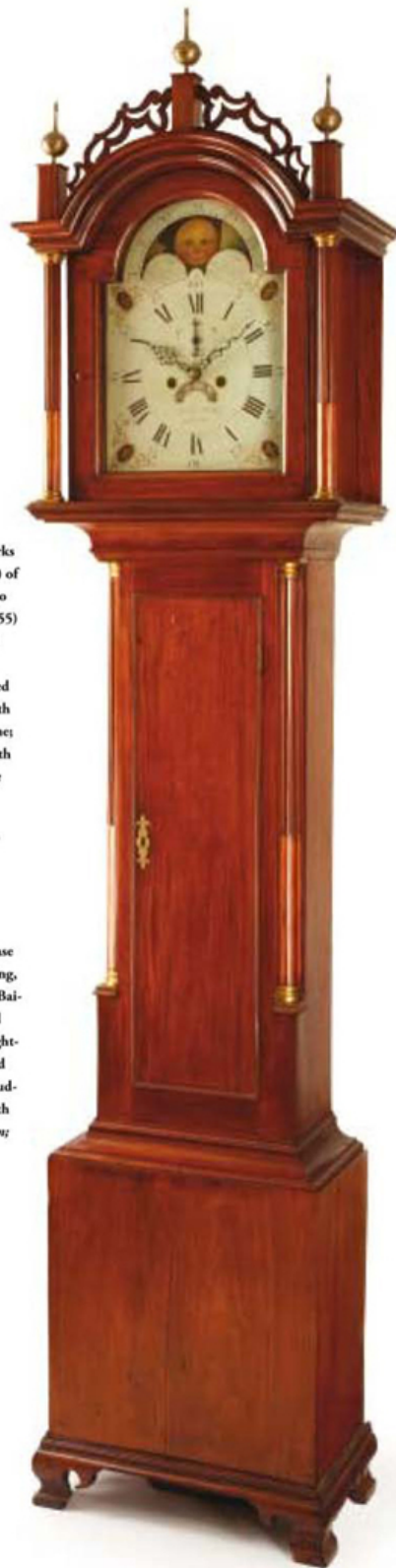
Elisha Cushing Jr. lived on Main Street in Hingham, in a house built by his father. Scattered references document his career as a cabinetmaker, but far more needs to be learned about his activities.²² What influenced his work? What led him to create the steeply pitched pediments of his clocks and high chests? Why did he choose to decorate several of these pediments with a fylfot, reminiscent of coastal Connecticut furniture? Did he visit or work briefly in Connecticut? Or did he see a Connecticut clock or chest in Hingham? Further research will surely yield clues, if not definitive answers, to these questions.

Our study of the work of the craftsmen explored in this article demonstrates the dangers of looking for a single regional identity in a particular area. Individual craftsmen in small communities often arrived at their own peculiar solutions to issues of design and construction. Such variety lies at the very heart of their work and instills a sense of appreciation in all of us who study it today.

¹ Brock Jobe, Gary R. Sullivan, and Jack O'Brien, *Harbor and Home, 1710–1850* (University Press of New England, Hanover, N. H., 2009). ² For more about the house, see Donna D. Curtin, "1749 Spooner House—A Brief History," 1999, typescript, Plymouth Antiquarian Society, Massachusetts. ³ Estate inventory of Ephraim Spooner, April 20, 1818, Plymouth County Probate Records, vol. 49, pp. 286–288, Plymouth, Massachusetts. ⁴ See Jobe, Sullivan, and O'Brien, *Harbor and Home*, No. 78. ⁵ For two related tables, see *The Magazine ANTIQUES*, vol. 114, no. 5 (November 1978), p. 959; and vol. 165, no. 5 (May 2004), pp. 28–29; the others are a privately owned example that descended in the Southard family of Plymouth and a table owned by a descendant of Nathaniel Spooner (1758–1826) of Plymouth that is now in the Plymouth Antiquarian Society. ⁶ For typical Boston desk interiors with carved shells, see Margareta Markle Lovell, "Boston Blockfront Furniture," *Boston Furniture of the Eighteenth Century*, Colonial Society of Massachusetts Publications, vol. 48 (Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Boston, 1974), pp. 116–117. ⁷ For a European example, see Arlene Palmer, *Glass in Early America: Selections from the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum* (Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Del., 1993), pp. 358–359. ⁸ Estate inventory of William Watson, recorded November 2, 1815, Plymouth County Probate Records, vol. 48, pp. 431–433. ⁹ Ebenezer Robbins entry in Jobe, Sullivan, and O'Brien, *Harbor and Home*, p. 377. ¹⁰ Accounts with Ebenezer Robbins, Rufus Robbins, and James Shurtleff, October 15, 1771–February 24, 1773, shipping account book, 1771–1779, pp. 1–5, 21; account with Ebenezer Robbins, November 12, 1785, shipping account book, 1783–1788, n. p., both in Spooner Archives, series V, box 2, Plymouth Antiquarian Society. Ephraim Spooner's accounts for his own household purchases are not known to survive. ¹¹ A nearly identical example is illustrated in Frederick K. Barbour, *The Stature of Fine Connecticut Furniture* (printed for the author, Hartford, Conn., 1959), n.p. For related New London County case furniture, see Thomas P. Kugelman, Alice K. Kugelman, and Robert Lionetti, *Connecticut Valley Furniture: Eliphalet Chapin and His Contemporaries, 1750–1800*, ed. Susan P. Schoelwer (Connecticut Historical Society Museum, Hartford, 2005), pp. 218–219. ¹² The second high chest is in a private collection. ¹³ The clocks were all studied by Gary R. Sullivan. ¹⁴ For more on Bailey's career and his use of skeletonized plates, see Jobe, Sullivan, and O'Brien, *Harbor and Home*, pp. 242–250. ¹⁵ James Wilson and Thomas Hodley Osborne of Birmingham, England, advertised the production of "White Clock Dials in imitation of enamel, in a manner entirely new" in 1772 (quoted in Philip D. Zimmerman, *Delaware Clocks* [Biggs Museum of American Art, Dover, Del., 2006], p. 45). Many American clocks have dials produced by either Wilson or Osborne. Boston specialists began to offer dials of their own during the 1790s. ¹⁶ It was previously attributed to John Bailey I in Philip Zea and Robert C. Cheney, *Clock Making in New England, 1725–1825, An Interpretation of the Old Sturbridge Village Collection* (Old Sturbridge Village, Sturbridge, Mass., 1992), pp. 22–23, Fig. 1-17. ¹⁷ A related cherry case, also with a stepped base, originally contained wooden works by John Bailey II and a painted paper dial applied to a wood backing, but the works and case were separated in the early 1990s. The original works are now in the collection of Gary R. Sullivan. ¹⁸ For New England clocks with taller bases, see Zea and Cheney, *Clock Making in New England*, p. 81, Pls. 1–2. For a clock similar to the one in Fig. 9 but with a taller base, see Jobe, Sullivan, and O'Brien, *Harbor and Home*, No. 84. ¹⁹ Calvin Bailey account book, 1784–1824, p. 37, National Watch and Clock Museum Library and Research Center, Columbia, Pennsylvania, notes the purchase of two small clock cases from Cushing. ²⁰ For more about this clock, see Jobe, Sullivan, and O'Brien, *Harbor and Home*, No. 87. ²¹ On both clocks, the front portions of the front feet and beaded strip below the front base molding are a single unit. This odd detail reinforces the connection between these two seemingly dissimilar clocks. ²² George Lincoln, "Manufacturers and Commerce," *History of the Town of Hingham, Massachusetts: Volume 1-Part II Historical* (Hingham, Mass., 1893), pp. 164–165; *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 166; Jobe, Sullivan, and O'Brien, *Harbor and Home*, p. 349.

BROCK JOBE is professor of American decorative arts for Winterthur's Program in American Material Culture.

GARY R. SULLIVAN is an antiques dealer in Sharon, Massachusetts, specializing in early American furniture and clocks.



Facing page:

Fig. 11. Dwarf clock with works by Calvin Bailey (1761–1835) of Hanover and case attributed to Theodore Cushing (1776–1855) of Hingham, c. 1806. Painted "Made for Josiah Cotton / BY CALVIN BAILEY" on the painted sheet-iron dial. Mahogany with lightwood inlay and white pine; height 52 ½, width 14 ½, depth 8 ¾ inches. *Private collection; Buckley photograph.*

Fig. 12. Details of side feet on the clocks in Figs. 7 and 13.

This page:

Fig. 13. Tall-case clock with works by Calvin Bailey and case attributed to Theodore Cushing, 1800–1808. Painted "Calvin Bailey / HANOVER" on the painted sheet-iron dial. Mahogany, lightwood inlay, cherry, maple, and white pine; height 92 ¾ (including finials), width 21 ¾, depth 10 ½ inches. *Private collection; Buckley photograph.*