



Crossing Borders

FROM BUCKS COUNTY, PA TO UPPER CANADA (ONTARIO)

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John Doan, cabinetmaker from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, made his mark in Canada

You could call this a story of cross-border cabinetmaking.

I was fortunate recently to get a behind-the-scenes look at some period furniture at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec. The main object of the visit was to see a piece I had read about—a secretary desk built by cabinet maker John Doan.

According to John McIntyre, a teacher of Canadian decorative arts and museum studies, Doan was part of “a long line of builders and woodworkers, beginning in Massachusetts in the early 17th Century.” John Doan himself was born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.ⁱ

In 1807, Doan moved to Upper Canada (now Ontario). According to McIntyre, the Doan family was “part of a large migration of Friends (Quakers) from Bucks County to Upper Canada. Here they were promised land and religious freedom.” It was here that Doan and his brother Ebenezer built furniture for themselves and the community. According to the museum, the secretary was one of four that John Doan built, this one for his personal use. He likely built it somewhere between 1830 and 1840.

The go-to reference book on furniture from this region is Howard Pain’s *The Heritage of Upper Canadian Furniture*. In it, he describes this piece as

“a vigorous expression of the Pennsylvania Chippendale style, which is consistent with

18th-Century Bucks County examples.”ⁱⁱ

When you finally come face-to-face with this piece, the first thing that

“...the Doan family was “part of a large migration of Friends (Quakers) from Bucks County to Upper Canada.”

strikes you is the amazing bird’s-eye maple. Then on closer examination, you note the skilled workmanship and design. And finally, if you know where to look, you discover some hidden surprises. The secretary has two main elements. The upper section has two panelled doors, rope-carved quarter columns, and two candle slides that have compartments to store documents. The lower section has four lapped drawers, two lid supports, and quarter columns. Inside are eight document drawers, an



*John Doan Slant-Top Secretary
Canadian Museum of History, 2007.22.235.1 a-b,
IMG2008-0574-0042-DM*



*John Doan Slant-Top Secretary
Canadian Museum of History, 2007.22.235.1 a-b,
IMG2008-0574-0044*

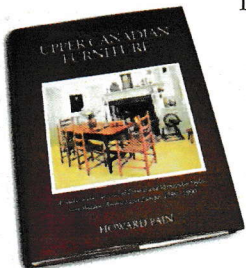
equal number of arcaded compartments, and a center door with an applied moulding, which conceals more drawers. But that’s not all.

What you don’t see, until a museum official reveals them, are the secret compartments.

Photograph of bird’s-eye detail taken by John Borley with permission courtesy of the Canadian Museum of History



Photograph of bird’s-eye detail taken by John Borley with permission courtesy of the Canadian Museum of History





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Photograph taken by John Borley with permission courtesy of the Canadian Museum of History

Those two small drawers behind the center door are actually part of a larger compartment. Pull it out, and at the back is a series of little hiding places. The two reeded columns on either side of the door also pull out to reveal secret compartments. (At least, I'm told they do.

The 19th-Century security system defeated us on the day of my visit!)

Each of the drawers in the lower section has two glass pulls that were designed to resemble flowers. The case sits on ogee bracket feet. Secondary wood is white pine.

The piece is in very good condition considering its age. It is essentially in its original condition, other than some minor repairs. The finish is a traditional shellac French polish, which the museum believes is original. All the hardware is original.



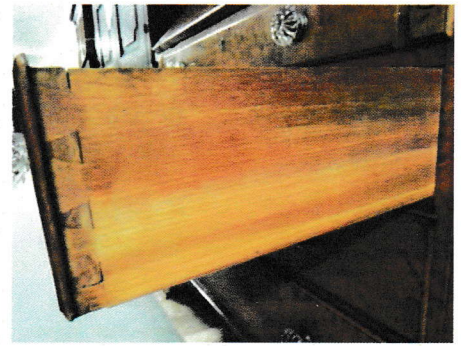
John Doan Straight-Front Chest of drawers
Canadian Museum of History, 2007.22.301,
IMG2008-0574-0021-DM

While I was at the museum, I also asked to see another piece of furniture—a chest of drawers. This one is just attributed to John Doan, but the similarities with the secretary are unmistakable. It has the same ogee feet, quarter columns, rich bird's-eye maple, and glass pulls. Secondary wood is white pine, including the top.

The route from John Doan's workshop to the museum is an interesting one. After his death, the secretary passed to his son. Later it was sold to another family. An antiques dealer bought the chest of drawers as part of the contents that had been left in an old house.

Eventually, these two pieces, along with about 260 pieces of furniture, art, tools, and household utensils, were acquired by collectors John and Heather Harbinson. That collection has been called "perhaps the most complete and best-documented collection of its kind in private hands."ⁱⁱⁱ John Harbinson said the secretary desk "has to be the cornerstone of the collection and probably the one piece I favour most."^{iv}

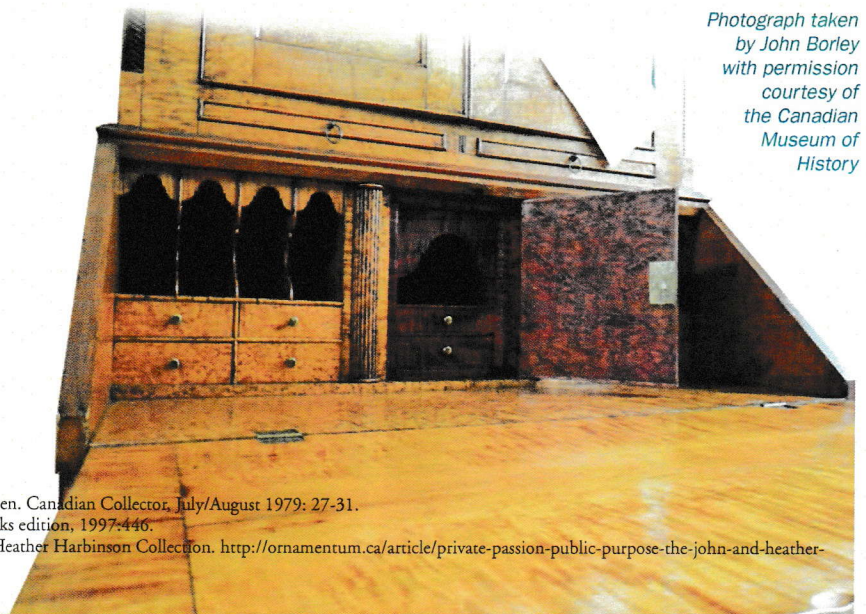
In 2007, the museum's predecessor, the Canadian Museum of Civilization,



Photograph taken by John Borley with permission courtesy of the Canadian Museum of History

acquired the collection, saving it from being broken up and preserving an important part of the country's heritage.

Sadly, the Doan pieces aren't on public display at this time. Like most museums, this one has space to show only a small fraction of its holdings. But the hope is to have most of the Harbinson collection made available online in 2015. Meanwhile, if you want to see these items up close and personal, you can make arrangements through the Canadian Museum of History. You will definitely come away inspired (<http://www.historymuseum.ca/home>).



Photograph taken by John Borley with permission courtesy of the Canadian Museum of History

i McIntyre, John. John and Ebenezer Doan: builders and furniture craftsmen. *Canadian Collector*, July/August 1979: 27-31.

ii Pain, Howard. *The Heritage of Upper Canadian Furniture*. Prospero Books edition, 1997:446.

iii Ornamentum Website. Private Passion, Public Purpose: The John and Heather Harbinson Collection. <http://ornamentum.ca/article/private-passion-public-purpose-the-john-and-heather-harbinson-collection/> Accessed October 1, 2007:1.

iv. Ibid.