

Furniture In Early South Carolina Gardens

As everyday life in the British American colonies became more safe and furniture more plentiful in the mid-eighteenth century, colonists often moved routine daily tasks outdoors as soon as the weather allowed. In warm South Carolina, especially, colonists spent much time outside hoping for a cool breeze. British American colonials referred to the grounds immediately around their house as the garden. Yards were smaller spaces usually contiguous to the main dwelling house or its outbuildings. Yards were designed for practical purposes: court yard, cow yard, wood yard, bleach yard. Traditionally the garden served as a place for promenading, meditating, working, or entertaining. The educated colonial gardener knew that the most esteemed taste dictated placing benches to emphasize a focal point in the garden, to terminate an impressive vista on the property, or to catch a fleeting breeze under trees around the grounds.

As early as 1669, English garden writer John Worlidge instructed his readers in *Systema Agriculturae* that proper garden seats should be placed "at the ends of your walks...that whilst you sit in them you will have the view of your garden." That philosophy continued throughout the colonial period until the first comprehensive American gardening book was published by Philadelphian Bernard M'Mahon in 1806. He wrote, "Rural Seats are placed in different parts, by the sides of long walks, under the shade of trees &c. for places of rest...In some spacious grounds various light ornamental buildings and erections are introduced as ornaments...such as temples, bowers...grottos, rural seats...fountains, obelisks, statues...usually erected...in openings between the division of the ground, and contiguous to the terminations of grand walks." 1

Like their less wealthy neighbors, the gentry also carried more common furniture outdoors whenever the weather permitted. Small, close living quarters were the rule in the colonies, even for the rich in the first half of the century. Hot, humid summers along the shores of the Atlantic encouraged a variety of sedentary outdoor garden activities such as chatting, washing, reading, gambling, cooking, sewing, courting, studying, and spinning. Gardens and yards served as welcome, natural extensions of indoor living spaces. Common household furniture including chairs, benches, and tables regularly found their way into yards and gardens. This made sense in a land where a balance between use and beauty was considered an art. Even the ordered, geometric gardens of the gentry in the colonies were a combination of ornament and function. Most colonists grew edible plants in their best gardens, and most moved everyday household furniture outdoors when the weather permitted. But, during the second half of the century, the gentry occasionally ordered special garden furniture from local craftsmen or from British factors.

Garden furniture formed a minor branch of the eighteenth century English furniture trade; yet most leading furniture designers sketched a few examples in their style books.² British arbiters of taste invented a rustic or "forest" furniture style for their new "natural" gardens. The highly contrived rococo, Chinese, gothic, and rural garden furniture designs—evolving as Britains rebelled against the tight cultural grip of Louis XIV French classicism—occasionally made their way to the colonies across the Atlantic. An inventory recorded at the death of Andrew Allen at Goose Creek, South Carolina in 1735 noted "an Old Forest Chair."³ Twisted roots, branch, and twig designs composed the frames of these outdoor seats. Both English and local craftsmen also produced cast iron garden furniture including chairs, benches, and tables during the early federal period.

Apparently not even illness could deter colonial garden sitting. Another specialized garden chair that appeared in a South Carolina inventory was the "garden machine" or "rolling chair." The 1771 and 1791 South Carolina inventories of Edward Wilkinson and Daniel Legare revealed that each owned "1 Mahogany Rolling Chair."⁴ The 1813 *Journal* of Peter Horry of Winyah Bay, near Georgetown, South

Carolina also mentioned a "Rolling Chair."⁵ Cabinetmaker Thomas Elfe advertised in the 1751 Charleston Gazette that he made "All kinds of Machine Chairs...for sickly or weak people."⁶ The garden machine appeared on several English trade cards, usually as a Windsor chair on a platform fitted with large side wheels and a small front wheel attached to a steering tiller.⁷ Jacques Rigaud's 1733 engraving of the gardens at Stowe shows Lord Cobham being pushed around in one of these machines.⁸

Many garden seats appear in colonial inventories with no specific description. The Charleston, South Carolina inventories of Robert Hamilton in July of 1755 and artist Alexander Gordon in October of the same year show each man owning two "garden chairs." In 1767, John Biggard, a Charleston turner, advertised both "Windsor and Garden chairs."⁹ The Charleston Gazette also offers a glimpse into the garden furniture of the period. In November, 1752, Richard Lake offers his plantation on the Ashley River for sale including "several handsome garden benches."

Eighteenth century colonial benches and chairs rarely survive, although we can see them in paintings of the period. Thomas Fraser painted a bench overlooking the South Carolina countryside, and an even simpler bench is seen in a Charleston watercolor by Francis C. Hill. Henry Benbridge painted stone garden seats in paintings of an unknown Charleston family between 1784 and 1790. One chair used in Southern gardens is the Campeach chair which is found in Spain, the West Indies, Virginia, Charleston, and Louisiana. A January 1819 watercolor by Benjamin Latrobe from his window in New Orleans depicts a man seated in one of these.

After the Revolution, gardening burgeoned into a democratic pursuit, both functional and ornamental, that crossed all social lines. Similarly, Windsor chairs—that could be used indoors or out—appealed to all levels of society in the new republic. Windsor chairs became the most popular garden furniture in America. Ironically, the original British Windsors may have been inspired by moveable garden chairs at Versailles early in the eighteenth century.¹⁰

The practical advantages of Windsor chairs were obvious. Windsors varied considerably in size and shape as English turners easily produced the spindles for the seats of local ash, oak, elm, beech, or yew woods. Craftsmen stained or painted their prize windsors white, green, or a variety of other colors. Windsors exported to the colonies were so quickly copied by local craftsmen that they became plentiful in the emerging nation. Young and old alike could tote Windsor chairs outdoors easily, and the see-through chair permitted a quantity of them to furnish a garden or piazza without obstructing the view. Cooling air could flow even through an occupied Windsor chair. Windsor chairs suited the new nation's republican aesthetic as well. They were just symmetrical enough to appeal to the new democracy's need for order, curved enough to recognize the influence of romance and nature, and sensible enough to overrule the curious, ostentatious designs of artificial twigs and roots in those English stylebooks.

In America outdoor windsors were often painted green to blend with nature. Englishman Uvedale Price wrote in his "Essays on the Picturesque" (a book well-known in the new American republic) that white seats created unnatural spots when placed amid verdure. Price's essays were read in the new republic. Accordingly, when Thomas Dobson printed the first American edition of his Encyclopedia or Dictionary of Arts and Science in Philadelphia in 1798 he recommended, "To paint arbours and all kinds of garden work, give a layer of white ceruse grinded in oil of walnuts...then give two layers of green...This green is of great service in the country for doors, window shutters, arbours, gardens seats, rails either of wood or iron; and in short for all works exposed to the injuries of the weather."¹¹

The popularity of green Windsor chair extended from the northern colonies to the deep south. Green Windsor garden chairs became fashionable in South Carolina well before the Revolution. At first, merchants offered imported chairs to their customers. In the February 1764 Charleston inventory of John McQueen was "1 Windsor Garden Seat." In 1768, Charleston merchants Sneed and White offered "Windsor Chairs ...and settees...walnut...fit for piazzas or gardens." Imported from Philadelphia. The

Philadelphia and English craftsmen had competition for the Charleston market when Philadelphia turner John Bliggard moved to the South in 1767 opened a "turner shop" and advertised "Windsor and Garden chairs... cheaper than could be imported." The 1775 Charleston inventory of George Inglais revealed "In the Passage...2 green Garden Windsor Chairs...2 Children do(garden Windsor Chairs)."¹²

After the Revolution, green windsor chairs abound in Charleston inventories. The 1783 inventory of Benjamin Cattell listed twelve green windsor chairs. In 1789 the estate of John Gibbs included six green side chairs and eight green arm chairs. In the same year, inventory clerks found green windsor chairs in John Watson's seed room along with his garden tools and botanical books. On Watson's piazza, he had four teal benches and one green bench. A year later, the recorders noted one dozen green windsor chairs in Andrew Hazel's entrance hall.¹³

The people of Charleston relied on nature's air conditioning and moved their furniture outdoors whenever weather permitted. This search for cooling breezes heightened South Carolinians' awareness of the design of their outdoor environment and spurred them to create pleasing, artistic gardens.

Afterthoughts: The author especially thanks Bradford L. Rauschenberg, Research Director for the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, for sharing his research with students of the material culture of the early South. Among the best discussions of garden furniture used in early America are: Bradford L. Rauschenberg, "Pre-1840 American Garden Furniture and its Precedents" Seventh Conference on Restoring Southern Gardens and Landscapes, October 5-7, 1989, Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Betsy Overton, "Furniture Used Outside the Home, à la Piazza or le Jardin, Beginning in England and Ending in Charleston" Unpublished, 1989; John Hardy, "The Garden Seat 1650-1850" Connoisseur June, 1979 118-123.

Notes

¹ Rosemary Verey, "Garden Furniture" Garden Ornaments, Brooklyn Botanic Garden Record, Vol. 43, No. 28, 15. Garden chairs were chairs, but the term garden seat was reserved for a bench. See M'Mahon 64 and 186.

² Eighteenth century English design books with plans for garden furniture include:

A Society of Upholsterers, Cabinet-Makers, etc., Genteel Household Furniture In the Present Taste. (London, 1762)

See Plate 19.

William Chambers, Chinese Designs. 1757.

----, Civil Architecture. 1759.

Thomas Chippendale, The Gentleman and Cabinet-Makers Director, 1754. (for Chinese railings)

----, Director, 3rd edition, 1762 (for a garden seat-Plate XXIV)

Mathias Daryl, New Book of Chinese, Gothic and Modern Chairs. 1751.

----, A New Book of Chinese Designs. 1754. (for root chairs)

William and Jonathan Halfpenny, New Designs for Chinese temples, Triumphal Arches, Garden Seats, Pallings, Etc. 1750.

----, Rural Architecture in the Chinese Taste. (London, Robert Sayer 1755) See pages 3 & 5 and plates 38, 39, 40, 48, 49.

Robert Manwaring, The Cabinet and Chair-Maker's Real Friend and Companion, or the Whole System of Chair-making made Plain

and Easy. (London, Henry Webley, 1765) Manwaring described these as "designs given for rural Chairs for Summerhouses finely ornamented with Carvings, Fountains, and beautiful Landscapes, with the Shepherd and his flock, reaper, etc. Also, some very beautiful designs, supposed to be executed with

Limbs of Yew, Apple, or Pear Trees, ornamented with Leaves and Blossoms, which if properly painted will appear like Native; these are the only designs of the kind that were ever published, rural Seats for Gardens and Parks, etc, etc." For rural chairs and seats see plates 24, and 29-32.

William Paine, The Builder's Pocket Treasury. 1763. (Seat for a Garden)

-----, The Builder's Companion, and Workman's General Assistant. 1769 (Back of a Garden Seat in the Gothick Taste)

I. & J. Taylor, Ideas for Rustic furniture proper for garden seats, summer houses, hermitages, cottages, etc. 1790.

William Wright, Grotesque Architecture or Rural Amusement. 1767.

³ Andrew Allen, Charleston County Wills, Etc., Volumes 65-66, 1732-1737, p. 331-347.

⁴ Edward Wilkinson, Charleston County Wills, Etc., Volume 14, July 12, 1771, p.63.

Daniel Legare, Charleston County Inventories, Vol. B, August 10, 1791, p. 365

⁵ "Journal of Peter Horry", South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine, Vol. 38, April, 1937, p. 49.

⁶ Thomas Elfe, Charleston Gazette, January 7, 1751.

⁷ These English trade cards are located in the British Museum in London, England.

⁸ Jacques Rigaud, Stowe Gardens

⁹ Robert Hamilton, Charleston County, South Carolina, Inventories, Vol. 82, 1753-1756, July 31, 1755, p. 674.

Alexander Gordon, Charleston County, South Carolina, Inventories, Vol. 82, 1753-56, October, 1755, p. 435-436.

John Biggard, Charleston Gazette and Country Journal, March 24, 1767.

¹⁰ For a discussion on Windsor chairs see Nancy Goynes Evans, "A History and Background of English Windsor Furniture" Furniture History (The Journal of the Furniture History Society) Volume XV, 1979, p. 32. Lord Percival wrote a letter to his brother-in-law in 1724 describing a Windsor type chair he had seen at the gardens at Versailles. By April of 1730 a London newspaper advertisement offered for sale "All sorts of Windsor Garden Chairs."

¹¹ Thomas Dobson, Encyclopedia or Dictionary of Arts and Science. Philadelphia 1798 Volume 13, p. 652-653.

¹² John McQueen, Charleston County Wills, Etc., Vols 88A-B, 1763-1767, p. 298-301. February 2, 1764.

Sheed and White, South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal, June 24, 1776.

John Biggard, South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal, March 24, 1767.

George Inglais, Charleston County, South Carolina, Inventories, Vol. A, 1783-1787, page 451-481. September 28, 1775.

¹³ Benjamin Cattell, Charleston County, South Carolina, Inventories, Vol. A, 1783-1787, p. 83.

John W. Gibbs, Charleston County, South Carolina, Inventories, Vol. A, 1783-1787, p. 191.

John Watson, Charleston County, South Carolina, Inventories, Vol. A, 1783-1787, p. 208.

Andrew Hasel, Charleston County, South Carolina, Inventories, Vol. A, 1783-1787, p. 245.

For still more green windsor chairs in South Carolina see:

Thomas Savage, Charleston County, South Carolina, Inventories, Vol. A, 1783-1787. p. 481

William Gibbs, Charleston County, South Carolina, Inventories, Vol. A, 1783-1787, p. 238.
William Burrows, Charleston County, South Carolina, Inventories, Vol. A, 1783-1787, p. 191.