

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"The Slagenhaupt Chairmakers of Taneytown"

Carroll County Times Article for 17 July 1994

by Jay A. Graybeal

Prior to the appearance of the furniture store in the mid-nineteenth century, most local residents purchased household furniture from local craftsmen who worked in the small country towns throughout the region. These craftsmen fashioned and repaired bedsteads, chests, cupboards, desks, tall clock cases, stands, tables and chairs made from local soft and hardwoods. Only occasionally did they receive orders for more expensive items made of imported mahogany. Like other craftsmen of their time, the furniture makers worked in small shops located in or adjacent to their residence. While not engaged in their craft they tended agricultural crops and farm animals which provided subsistence and additional income.

The Slagenhaupt family of Taneytown is representative of the early craftsmen who worked in the region. Their work, which can be attributed on the basis unique turnings, has been recognized and sought after for more than half a century. The following newspaper article by the late Mrs. Thurlow Null provides a unique description of this craft family:

John Slagenhaupt, the maker of the much sought Slagenhaupt chairs, was of German descent. His grandfather came from Germany about 1770. Little is known of his family except that he had a son, Samuel, who married a Miss DeHoff and lived on a small place between Uniontown and Trevanion, just back of the farm now owned by Mr. Wm. Flohr. The buildings have long since gone to ruin. Samuel, who was also a chair maker, had several children, John was one of the older sons, born July 6, 1821. He married and lived in a three-roomed, one-story log house about two miles south of Taneytown, the house has been remodeled and is now owned by Mr. Maurice Angell.

His wife died quite young and his house was kept by a maiden cousin, Barbara Newcomer.

His work shop was a small, two-story building, the top floor being used for storing lumber, etc. The posts and rungs of his chairs were made on a lathe turned by a treadle, unless he could inveigle some boy in the neighborhood to turn [it] by hand. He seldom secured the same boy twice as there was quite an argument, usually, as to speed and "jerkiness", etc.

The splits forming the seats of the chairs, he split with a knife from oak strips. The posts and rockers were made from green wood, while the rungs and other parts were made from dry hickory, thereby insuring a tight fit.

He used, mostly, maple wood, but would use any lumber the customer supplied. He made a large arm chair for my father from the wood of a large peach tree.

His prices were from one dollar to three-fifty according to size and pattern of the chair.

Mr. Slagenhaupt was a gentle, kindly little man, short and rather stout, ruddy complexion, bald head with a fringe of gray hair. He was badly afflicted with what he called "ts ick" and had frequently to stop work and smoke a vegetable mixture to get relief.

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He with other members of this family were members of the Reformed Church, holding membership with the church that stood in the cemetery at the top of "Lazy Hill" Uniontown. In this cemetery, he and members of his family are buried. He died March 4, 1890.

Some years after his death, his old shop was used by another party and chairs of the same style as the Slagenhaupt chairs were turned out. They were a good imitation, and to anyone not familiar with the former, could easily pass of Slagenhaupt make, however they lacked the careful attention to detail and the symetry of design shown in the Slagenhaupt chairs. His chairs were always of the same style, differing only in size and whether a rocker or "straight" chair.

To we children he was lovingly known of "Uncle Johnny" and many happy hours were spent playing in the shavings under his work bench and collecting the queer shaped blocks we found there, and as I look back on these childhood days it seems to me that Uncle Johnny needs no other eulogy than that we children loved him so dearly, for after all, is not the love of a child a strong recommendation as to the character of the man.

Carroll Record

July 20, 1945

The Slagenhauts continued supplying local customers with chairs long after cheap factory made chairs became available. The popularity of their work was due, in part, to the conservative taste that persisted in the rural communities such as Taneytown.

Photo caption: Small rocking chair attributed to John Slagenhaupt, Taneytown, Md., c. 1820-1850. This chair has been attributed to Samuel or John Slagenhaupt. The turnings are identical to other chairs having strong oral traditions of having been made by the Slagenhauts. Historical Society of Carroll County, gift of Mrs. Raymond L. Wantz, 1962.