

County's early craftsmen can stand with some of the best – November 12, 2023

Don't count out Carroll County's early craftsmen when it comes to producing fine quality work — clocks, guns, stoves, furniture, even gravestones. Examples can be found in local museums scattered from Taneytown in the northwest to Sykesville in the southeast. Our ancestors didn't need to shop in Baltimore or depend upon shipments from England to furnish their homes attractively, although some of the wealthier ones certainly did

The Taneytown History Museum on East Baltimore Street has one room featuring the work of that area's noteworthy artisans such as Eli Bentley. Bentley's clocks were prized at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and are treasured by owners today or have found their way into museums. Who wouldn't want to hand down an elegant tall case clock to their children or grandchildren — providing, of course, that their homes have tall ceilings! Bentley made the works, but the buyer had to find someone to build a case. Taneytown had three prominent cabinetmakers in its early days — Henry Reindollar, David Fuss, and George Fair. One or all of them likely crafted cases for Bentley's clocks. When Eli wasn't making clocks, he also repaired watches for those lucky enough to own them. But Eli wasn't the only talented member of the family. Caleb Bentley was recognized as a fine silversmith.

Every man living in an area as sparsely populated as Carroll and Frederick counties needed a gun in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and Taneytown had several top-notch gunsmiths to choose from. Mathias Shroyer was one of them. In 1798, he received a contract from the fledgling federal government to produce 1,000 muskets based upon a recommendation from Francis Scott Key's father. Unfortunately, two years later, Shroyer's factory caught fire and he lost everything including his tools. However, guns he produced can still be found including one recently acquired by the Taneytown History Museum. Philip Creamer was another local gunsmith. Although he moved west in 1805 and began making guns near St. Louis for the early explorers of the Louisiana Territory, he developed his skill here.

Every home needed chairs, and three generations of Slagenhaupts living on the outskirts of Taneytown produced distinctive rocking chairs, ladder-back chairs, and children's furniture from the late 1700s until the 1890s. Jacob Thomas also made chairs at his shop in Uniontown. In 1814 he advertised in *The Engine of Liberty and Uniontown Advertiser* that he “always keeps on hand, Windsor and Fancy Chairs, and does Sign and House painting, Gilding, &c.” Windsor chairs were wildly popular in the early 1800s. They were sturdy and practical, often painted green, yellow, white, or red. When Jacob Sherman of Westminster died in 1822, an inventory of his household furnishings included a dozen of them. Wouldn't it be nice if he had left a receipt showing where he purchased them!

Samuel Crouse was a Taneytown potter. He didn't produce the china you would use on your dining room table, but he did turn out huge quantities of earthenware — bread bowls, crocks, and flower pots. Carroll County had other potters as well, however none made fine china. Although Frederick County could boast an accomplished glassblower, there is no evidence that anyone in Carroll County carried on that trade.

In the 1860s, Peter Warner, a craftsman from Lineboro, was weaving brightly colored bed coverlets with intricate patterns. Long after he died, his talent put Carroll County on the map. One of his coverlets became part of a national traveling exhibit titled “American Fancy: Exuberance in the Arts.” Many families still own coverlets made by local weavers which have survived even after more than a century and a half of use.

Adam Shower operated a very successful iron foundry in the center of Manchester beginning in the 1850s. While much of what his shop turned out was agricultural equipment, he also produced cast iron stoves, the kind you might find in a 19<sup>th</sup> century kitchen but also heating a parlor, a church or a school house. The side panels of cast iron stoves were often very decorative. When kitchens were no longer dominated by huge open fireplaces, cast iron stoves took over. The Historical Society of Carroll County currently has one of Shower’s attractive stoves on display in the Shellman House kitchen.

Blacksmiths probably don’t get the credit they deserve as craftsmen in their own right. Their shops appear all over the 1862 Martenet map of Carroll County. While much they produced was utilitarian, such items as andirons, iron gates, hooks, and hinges offered opportunities for a blacksmith to be very creative. Saddle makers and basket makers also produced goods which, if they had survived, were examples of fine craftsmanship.

Not to be forgotten are the many girls and young women who left behind samplers demonstrating their embroidery skills, or the talented dressmakers and bonnet makers whose fine work has disappeared as clothing wore out.

Lastly, the gravestones made by Sebastian “Boss” Hammond attest to his remarkable mastery of carving stone. His work can still be seen in cemeteries in Baltimore, Carroll, and Frederick counties. He began carving while still enslaved about 1830.

If you enjoy fine craftsmanship, take time to visit Carroll’s museums to see the handiwork of local artisans on display. Be sure to check for open hours. Watch for posts on the Historical Society of Carroll County’s Facebook page for new exhibits around the county or nearby.

*Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.*

*Image 1 – Submitted photo Caption: One of Eli Bentley’s tall case clocks on display at the Historical Society of Carroll County. The dial includes his name and “TaneyTown” along with seashells painted in gold leaf.*

*Image 2 – Submitted photo Caption: Jacob R. Thomas advertised his chairmaking business in the earliest newspaper produced in Carroll County – The Engine of Liberty and Uniontown Advertiser.*

*Image 3 – Submitted photo Caption: Signature of Eli Bentley, Taneytown’s renown maker of tall case clocks.*