

Cupola House Tea Table

By

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Editor's note: For an enlarged view of figures, simply zoom in on your computer.

Who believes in coincidences? Most people in law enforcement, science, and engineering are skeptical of coincidences. We, too, are skeptical and will explain in this article. This article provides information that has emerged since the publication of our book. It is not intended as a rehash of the book.

In our book, *The Cupola House Carver*,¹ we studied numerous pieces of carved Edenton furniture as well as the architectural carving in Francis Corbin's Cupola House. Details of our research, discovery process, and results are presented in the book. Our research resulted in identifying Samuel Black as Edenton's premier carver, and he accomplished his carving with only ten gouges, a veiner, and a V-parting tool. Of interest in this article, Black executed the architectural trim in the Cupola House and also created a set of eight carved armchairs and a round, piecrust tea table for Corbin's dining room. Four of these chairs are extant (Fig. 1, Cupola House armchair, courtesy of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts).

A round, piecrust tea table, proven to be by Black based on the use of three of his ten gouges, also survives (Fig. 2, Piecrust tea table by

Samuel Black) (see detailed discussion of carving of this table in *The Cupola House Carver*) (Fig. 3, Back view of Fig. 2).



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

Is this tea table the one originally owned by Corbin and situated in his dining room with the eight armchairs? It was acquired 25 years ago from a prominent Charleston antiques dealer who purchased it from a Virginia picker. No additional provenance is known at present. The table is constructed totally of mahogany. There is no question that all the carving on this table was executed using only three of Black's gouges, the same three that were also used in carving Corbin's armchairs and the Cupola House trim. This is strong evidence that this table is Corbin's tea table. A closer examination of Black's time at the Cupola House is enlightening to this point.

The information covered in our book strongly supports the premise that Samuel Black was commissioned by Francis Corbin, or someone on Corbin's behalf, to come to Edenton to adorn the structure being built for Corbin, now the Cupola House, with carved elements, and to construct and carve a set of furniture of a level to compliment the house's interior. This is remarkably similar to William Buckland's service to George Mason over four years, from 1755 to 1759, at Gunston Hall in Fairfax County in northern Virginia, where he created elaborate carved interiors and apparently complimentary sets of furniture.

Buckland joined thousands of other British woodworkers by entering into an indenture agreement. He agreed to serve Mason as a "Carpenter and Joiner". In return, Buckland received passage to Virginia and an annual salary.² In all likelihood, Corbin engaged Black under a similar arrangement.

The Cupola House itself offers evidence of Black's arrival in Edenton. It has always seemed odd that the prominent brackets supporting the Cupola House's jettied second floor are uncarved while the integral ends of the plates and principal purlins of the roof structure and the ceiling joist ends under the soffit of the cupola roof contain carving matching carving on the interior of the house, now identified as Black's work. Black even carved the elaborate lower portion of the original finial that graced the soffit of the main roof's front gable. All these elements, the brackets as well as the ends of the plates, purlins, and joists, as well as the finial, would need to be carved on the ground before they were affixed to the structure of the house. The answer to a question such as these uncarved brackets is often the simplest. The most obvious reason that these prominent and highly visible first-floor brackets are unadorned is that the carver had not yet arrived. This, along with his first recorded presence in Edenton in the 1759 tax list, helps pinpoint Black's arrival in Edenton in late 1758 or early 1759. At this point, the house, using timbers felled after the growing season of 1757, would have been framed up to the second-floor structure but not yet up to the roof, making roof elements available for carving.

Black continued his work for Corbin, carving interior trim in the house and constructing furniture to fill it probably through 1760 and perhaps

into 1761, noting that the knee wall supports on the third floor were added from trees felled after the growing season of 1759. Considering this timeline, and based on an examination of the carving on and in the house, the eight arm chairs, and the round tea table, Black exclusively used these same ten gouges, plus a veiner and a V-parting tool, throughout his service to Corbin, which seems to have been from 1758 through around 1760 or 1761. The money earned through his work for Corbin undoubtedly fueled Black's rapid rise to prominence through the early 1760s, culminating in the 1763 purchase of what is now the Pembroke Hall property and the 1765 Edenton Tax List showing his expanded workforce of three white males and one black male in his household. His initial limited set of ten gouges also undoubtedly increased through the early 1760s, making a piece of furniture such as the tea table that was constructed exclusively with three of Black's initial ten gouges even more likely to be the product of the Corbin commission.

The execution of the round tea table's ball and claw feet, including the distinctive sharp rear talon found on the back of its feet, also clearly relate it to the Cupola House armchairs, as does the high level of the tea table's decorative adornment (Fig. 4, Tea table foot showing rear talon).



Figure 4

Notice in Fig. 4 how the lower portion of the rear of the tea table ball was removed to allow the sharp talon to be created and emphasized, just as the roundness of the rear of each armchair ball was removed to create and emphasize each sharp rear talon. These indented, sharp rear talons are incorporated into Black's earliest work in Edenton, which was his work for Corbin. They are so unusual, if not unique, that the design must have been done at least with Corbin's acquiescence, and perhaps at Corbin's instruction.

This is the only example of a round tea table of the mid-eighteenth century displaying ball and claw feet and a piecrust top that can be shown conclusively to have been made in North Carolina, in this case in Edenton. Its quality is also consistent with the quality of the one round mahogany tea table sold from the dining room at Corbin's September 20, 1768 estate sale, based on the price it fetched. The "8 arm Mahogany

Chairs”, also in the dining room and sold in the same sale, were purchased by Samuel Johnston for 8 pounds, 15 shillings. The one round mahogany tea table also sold to Johnston for 2 pounds, or essentially the value of two of the extravagantly carved and ornamented mahogany armchairs.

It should be noted that not only did the quality of the eight mahogany armchairs and the mahogany tea table in Mr. Corbin's dining room appeal to Johnston, perhaps the wealthiest man in Edenton, but that Johnston also purchased most of the furniture at Mr. Corbin's estate sale. He purchased the two square mahogany dining tables, both beds and furniture, a dressing table, two sets of walnut chairs and a smoking chair, and Mr. Corbin's desk and bookcase. Considering Johnston's wealth and interest in these pieces in addition to the eight armchairs and the tea table, Corbin's wealth and desire to impress all by his construction and furnishing of the Cupola House, and Black's several years of service to Corbin as well as Black's obvious skills as a cabinetmaker and carver, it is safe to assume that Black probably constructed most, if not all, of the furniture Mr. Corbin used to furnish the Cupola House upon its completion. Furthermore, Johnston obviously favored Black's work, having just purchased 120 pounds eight shillings of furniture from Black in March 1768, just six months before his Cupola House purchases.

At the Cupola House annual meeting in Edenton on Sept. 25, 2022, two armchairs, exact replicas of Corbin's eight originals, and the Samuel Black piecrust tea table were shown together for the first time (Fig. 5, Two replica armchairs and the Black tea table). The replica armchairs were created by Don Jordan and will be part of a set of eight he is making for display in the Cupola House. Also, seen in Fig. 5 are the modern equivalents of the gouges Black used in his work on the Cupola House trim, armchairs, and tea table.



Figure 5

While preparing this exhibit for the Cupola House meeting, we had a eureka moment. It became apparent that the height of the chairs' arms is

the exact height of the tea table top. Based on this new and surprising discovery, we next took the opportunity to determine the heights of nine of the round tea tables that appear in *Edenton Furniture and Culture, Colonial and Federal Periods*,³ that by proportion, decorative details, and descent or recovery histories are attributed to Edenton makers. A number of these were undoubtedly made by Black, although some are probably the work of John Rombough and perhaps others. While round tea tables of the period display fairly uniform heights, the Edenton tables examined ranged in height from 27 inches to 28 ½ inches. The matching height of Mr. Black's armchair arms and the height of Mr. Black's round tea table with ball and claw feet and piecrust top, both of which measure 27 ¾ inches, is not a coincidence. He intentionally constructed this tea table to match with Corbin's eight armchairs. The totality of the physical evidence, the same level of decorative quality, the relationship of the dome-like ball and claw feet and especially the sharp rear talons, their creation by the same man with the same tools at the same time, and now the added evidence that the height of the arms exactly match the height of the table top, strongly supports that the eight armchairs and the round tea table were created by Samuel Black as part of the same 1758 commission, were originally owed by Francis Corbin, and were part of his furnishings in the Cupola House dining room.

End Notes:

1. Jordan, Don, Newbern, Tom, and Melchor, Jim, 2021, *The Cupola House Carver*: Edenton, NC, Elizabeth Vann Moore Foundation.

(Books are available for sale online at www.ehcnc.org and at the Barker House in Edenton.)

2. Hurst, Ronald L. and Prown, Jonathan, 1997, *Southern Furniture 1680-1830*: Williamsburg, VA, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, pp. 264-269.

3. Newbern, Thomas R. J. and Melchor, James R., 2008, *Edenton Furniture and Culture Colonial and Federal Periods*: Benton, KY, Cupola House Assoc. & Legacy Ink Publishing.