

# SHENANDOAH VALLEY FURNITURE AS IT RELATES TO ISAAC HITE'S BELLE GROVE

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The forces shaping American culture have always been a special blend of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and other craft elements. Walt Whitman noted that America was not a nation, but rather a nation of nations. Its speech a medley of many tongues, its religion a mixture of innumerable sects, and its furniture an amalgam of many traditions. (Wendell Garrett)

And so it is with the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Jost Hite led one group of German settlers to the Valley in 1731, just as Alexander Ross led the Quakers, and James Wood led settlers from Orange County, Virginia. Countless others, members of the Church of England, Presbyterians, Lutherns, Reformed Germans, Quakers, Moravians, Swiss immigrants, French Huguenots, and Free and Enslaved Blacks, all moved and settled in the Shenandoah Valley.

This diversity of cultures, caused the Valley to become a true melting pot. Individuals, however, often sought out craftsmen and merchants of their own cultural background and language. Thus, material culture of all kinds, reflects the background and origins of its owners. Furniture in particular reflects its owners taste, fashion, ethnic origin, religion, wealth or lack thereof, and available craftsmen.

In eighteenth century America, where migration and settlement were rapidly changing, many influences impacted one's taste in furniture. The Hite family for example lived in the states of New York, and Pennsylvania, prior to settling in the Shenandoah Valley. Certainly their taste in furniture was influenced by their friends, family, and acquaintances that they met during their migration.

The Revolutionary War created a huge and sudden demand for war materials and consumer goods that could not be met by the limited work force available in the rebelling colonies. This led to increased wages, soaring prices, and prosperity for craftsmen. The period of 1790 to 1794

was one of rapid economic expansion. At this time, both Isaac Hite and David Lupton, chose to build their mansions and furnish them. The prosperity of the times is reflected in the quality, variety, and volume of the furniture produced. This trend was reversed when the embargo of 1808 severely curtailed trade and ruined many merchants. During this time, craftsmen and mechanics became more self-reliant, used local materials and goods, and became more independent of imports.

The establishment of the second Bank of the United States in 1816 enabled the government to refinance debt incurred during the War of 1812. The resultant flood of paper money caused a brief period of inflation. When the bank reduced the money supply, the financial panic of 1819 ensued. Cabinetmakers and their patrons had to adjust to these varying financial conditions, and these conditions are reflected in the furniture.

Soon after 1820, mechanization will begin to become prominent in the furniture making industry. As mechanization prospers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, furniture styles will rapidly change, and the regional characteristics of furniture will gradually decline. In the rural south, some of these regional characteristics and methods will linger longer on the scene than in more urban environments. With the advent of the Civil War and reconstruction, economic conditions in the Valley would again favor home cottage industries, and local craftsmen. The survival rate of the decorative arts of the Shenandoah Valley is limited because of the impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction. These objects are prized today for their beauty, craftsmanship, rarity, and historical importance.