

A fascinating piece of furniture on display at the Morris-Jumel Mansion collection is a truly unique patented desk. The designer of this unusual piece of furniture was Stephen Hedges of New York. Little is known about Stephen Hedges except for the United States patent that was issued on April 4 1854: Patent No. 10,740. In the patent Stephen Hedges declares he has, "invented a new and useful piece of furniture, intended to serve as a table alone or as chair and table combined."<sup>1</sup>

The patent went on to describe the invention as follows, "the nature of my invention consists in dividing a table into two parts; one of which parts forms a smaller table and the other a chair, hinged to the smaller table at one side; the part forming the smaller table, having a fixed top, to which the top of the other part is hinged in the form of a flap, at the line of junction, so as to be capable of being thrown back on the fixed part of the top, or of being turned over on the chair, which is of proper height to receive it on a level with the top of the part forming the smaller table."

The details continue, "When the two parts are brought close together and the flap is turned over the chair, the table thus formed presents the appearance of an ordinary table; but when the flap is thrown over the fixed part of the top, the chair is exposed, and the smaller table is complete in itself, forming a convenient writing table with an attached seat."<sup>2</sup>

The patent which includes technical drawings and a written description of the workings of the mechanism for the metamorphosis from table to chair/ desk combination describes the benefit of such an invention as, "this method of constructing and combining a chair and table does not increase the size of the table, nor injure and alter its external appearance in the least; but it economizes space and secures convenience."<sup>3</sup>

Surprisingly, the idea of a combination desk and chair was not new. An early example is that of Giovanni Socchi of Florence Italy who invented a combined desk and chair for Malmaison, the residence of Napoleon Bonaparte. The mechanical desk as it has been called, dates from 1810 and was made of mahogany with gilded bronze ornamentation.

A key difference between the French desk and the desk at Morris-Jumel, is that Socchi placed his desk on a plinth. By 1854 Hedges had devised a system with hinges and locks which did away with the plinth. While it cannot be known if Stephen Hedges was aware of the Socchi desk at Malmaison, the idea of a desk and chair combination had obviously preoccupied designers for some time.

Two factors add to the mystique of the patent desk, the "combined table and chair" in the collection of Morris-Jumel Mansion. First is the very limited number of these types of desks in existence and second is the identity of the patent holder, Stephen Hedges. The last most complete research on the existence of the patent Stephen Hedges' desk, conducted in 1998 and in the files of the Winterthur Museum, found only twenty six of this style of desk and chair combination in existence. The example at the Morris-Jumel Mansion was one of those counted. The desk in the collection was restored at some time in the past, but retains all the features that identify the desk as one of that number, including a metal stamp which identifies the desk as "Hedges Patent April 1854."

The second mystery is who was Stephen Hedges? I recently conducted some census and directory research at the New York Public Library to see if new information could be found. In the patent for the 'Combined Table and Chair', Patent 10,740, dated April 4, 1854, Stephen Hedges identifies himself as of New York, New York.

The earliest record of a Stephen Hedges in New York City working as a furniture maker was in the 1854-1855 Trows New York Directory where a Stephen Hedges was listed with a profession of 'furniture' based

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<sup>1</sup> United States Patent Office: Stephen Hedges of New York, NY 'Combined table and chair' patent no. 10,740, dated April 4, 1854, 1.

<sup>2</sup> United States Patent Office: Stephen Hedges of New York, NY 'Combined table and chair' patent no. 10,740, dated April 4, 1854, 1.

<sup>3</sup> United States Patent Office: Stephen Hedges of New York, NY 'Combined table and chair' patent no. 10,740, dated April 4, 1854, 1.

at 252 Ninth Avenue and living at 81<sup>st</sup> and Eighth Avenue.<sup>4</sup> This was the only listing for Stephen Hedges working in furniture manufacture found in the Directory both before and after that date.

The next step was to see if I could find Stephen Hedges in the Federal Census for New York. A review of Federal census records found a Stephen Hedges in New York City in 1850 age 48, married to Lucy with three adult children, though no profession was listed.<sup>5</sup> A further search of the Federal Census found Stephen Hedges in 1860 now in Columbia County New York, age 58, with his profession listed as 'cabinet maker' with the value of his real estate as '\$2000' and the value of his personal estate valued at '\$840.'<sup>6</sup> A review indicated that this was the same Stephen Hedges found in 1850 previously based in New York. To add to the available information and offer tantalizing clues was that Stephen Hedges, now in upstate New York, had also taken out two patents, one for an 'improved sash stop or fastener' dated September 15 1863<sup>7</sup> and the other for an 'improvement in ladders' dated November 10 1874.<sup>8</sup>

Could this be the Stephen Hedges who invented the 'combined table and chair' in the collection at Morris-Jumel Mansion? If I had found the right Stephen Hedges, the information suggested a hypothesis. A reasonable hypothesis would be that Stephen Hedges, based in New York, probably working in the furniture industry in some capacity had developed a prototype for his 'combined table and chair' sometime before 1854 and had then applied for a patent. When the patent had been received he may have tried to manufacture his new invention in New York City. The rarity of the desk suggests that the desk was in limited production. Perhaps, it was too expensive to produce or perhaps too avant-garde for the consumer. This would explain why there is only one listing for a Stephen Hedges in the New York City directories.

After the lack of success of this invention he moved upstate to continue his work as a cabinetmaker and continued to invent. However viable the hypothesis though at this stage this is just speculation and further research is needed.

One mystery about the combined table and chair can be clarified. Sometimes surviving examples of these desks, often those without the patent badge are called "Aaron Burr desks." This story, started in 1911 by a newspaper article in the New York Herald, detailed a recent purchase by a collector of a similar desk that he believed had been among the personal effects of Aaron Burr. However quaint the story may seem to be, Aaron Burr died in 1836 and, therefore, he could not have purchased this innovative piece of furniture because it was officially patented in 1854.<sup>9</sup>

So the mystery of the desk has been explained but questions about the life of Stephen Hedges remain. Whatever the outcome of the research, there is no question that Morris-Jumel Mansion has a unique piece of American patent furniture in its collection.

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<sup>4</sup> Trow's New York City Directory 1854-1855 (New York: John F. Trow Publisher, 1854-55) 336. New York Public Library, Milstein division.

<sup>5</sup> 1850 United States Federal Census New York Ward 16, District 1, New York, New York, p.153A; <http://ancestrylibrary.com> (accessed May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011) New York Public Library, Milstein division.

<sup>6</sup> 1860 United States Federal Census Columbia County New York p.903. <http://ancestrylibrary.com> (accessed May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011) New York Public Library, Milstein division.

<sup>7</sup> United States Patent Office: Stephen Hedges of Hudson, New York "Improved Sash Stop or Fastener" Patent 39,993 September 15 1863.

<sup>8</sup> United States Patent Office: Stephen Hedges of Hudson, New York "Improvement in Ladders" Patent 156,635 November 10 1874.

<sup>9</sup> United States Patent Office: Stephen Hedges of Hudson, New York "Improvement in Ladders" Patent 156,635 November 10 1874.