

# The Legend of Little Jimmy Webb's Dressing Table

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Figure 1

Scholars have recognized the significance of the “Hillsborough School” dressing table<sup>1</sup> (Fig.1) in the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts collection for more than a generation. It has been included in two publications since 1977<sup>2</sup>, but there has been little formal investigation of the table. MESDA curators attributed the table to Hillsborough, North Carolina between 1765 and 1785 due to its association with a group of tables and a group of chairs commonly referred to as the “Hillsborough School”.<sup>3</sup> Legend states that North Carolina Governor Thomas Burke gave the table to the Webb family of Hillsborough.

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<sup>1</sup> MESDA Collection, Accession Number 3777.2

<sup>2</sup> The dressing table was featured in the 1977 exhibition and catalog *North Carolina Furniture: 1700-1900*, page 26, at the North Carolina Museum of History and in the 1991 book of the MESDA Collection, *The Regional Arts of the Early South*, page 139.

<sup>3</sup> June Lucas commented in a personal conversation that John Bivins, MESDA's former Director of Publications, was responsible for attributing both the table and chair groups to the “Hillsborough School”, June 27, 2012.

However, the family patriarch, Dr. James Webb, was only nine-years-old at the time of Governor Burke's death. Webb also lived in neighboring Granville County. This project proposes a more plausible theory of the MESDA table's descent, as it explores the known histories of the "Hillsborough School" of tables and chairs. Evidence suggests that a carpenter working in the same period as the "Hillsborough School" may have built this group of furniture as well.

For centuries tables have served as household furnishings. By the eighteenth-century, the customs of self-adornment among affluent men and women resulted in the development of the dressing table.<sup>4</sup> The MESDA dressing table fits the similar description and size of a typical dressing table form identified in eighteenth-century Virginia and North Carolina. However, its function and use in the ritual of dressing is not certain. Based on what appears to be several ink stains inside the drawer, owners likely used the MESDA table for writing, at least some of the time. Traditional indications that the table was used for dressing are missing as well. There is no evidence that the drawer ever contained dividers and the top shows no wear from having a dressing box or dressing glass resting on it. Therefore, the dual functionality of the MESDA table is a viable concept.

The MESDA table is made of native black walnut with yellow pine as a secondary wood. The two-board top, with a molded edge and slight overhang on all four sides, is attached to the case with screws. The sides and back of the case are tenoned to the leg posts with two pegs and the front skirt is tenoned with one peg. The carved astragals on the front and side skirts are common architectural decorative elements seen elsewhere on furniture of the period and in house interiors. A single drawer extends the full width of the front skirt and has three lipped edges, which keep the drawer from resting flush with the case. The drawer has a brass escutcheon plate nailed to the front with a lock behind and two original brass pulls attached to pierced plates. One of the pierced plates likely broke prior to its initial application to the drawer because the finish underneath the break is consistent with the original finish. The drawer sides are secured to the front and back with three crude dovetails and the tops of the drawer sides are rounded. The drawer bottom is set in a groove on the sides and is nailed into place. The turned legs begin with a baluster turning near the leg posts and taper to carved ball-and-claw feet with three forward-facing toes and one behind. Nearly the entire table retains its original appearance save for a couple of replacement interior screws and a replaced drawer runner.

If the MESDA curators did not associate the table with other furniture from Hillsborough, it could be mistaken for a Virginia-made table since it has characteristics of Tidewater styles. The strongly projecting profile of the feet, baluster turnings of the upper legs, lack of a rail above the drawer, and use of walnut and yellow pine are all details present in Tidewater furniture.<sup>5</sup> However, the appearance and method of its construction

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald L. Hurst and Jonathan Prown, *Southern Furnithre 1680-1830: The Colonial Williamsburg Collection* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1997), 275.

<sup>5</sup> John Bivins and Forsyth Alexander, *The Regional Arts of the Early South: A Sampling from the Collection of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts* (Winston-Salem, NC: Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, 1991), 139.

suggests it was likely made outside of the major craftsman towns of Tidewater Virginia or Coastal North Carolina. Knotted, lesser-quality walnut planks are used for the top-boards and rear of the case. The proper-left-front leg has an additional mortise carved into it that was filled with a non-functioning peg. This craftsmanship suggests the leg might have been meant for use on the back, or was simply just an extra one in the shop. The ball-and-claw feet are not commonly found on turned, tapered legs from Tidewater Virginia or Coastal North Carolina. They most often appear on cabriole legs. As the original finish suggests, the proper-left brass plate was broken before it was attached to the drawer front. These factors led curators to associate the table with backcountry construction, especially since the baluster-turned legs, astragal-carved skirt, and heavily-molded top edge implies that a carpenter, far more prevalent in the backcountry than cabinetmakers, designed and constructed the table.

Hillsborough was an important eighteenth-century North Carolina backcountry center for trade and commerce. Founded in 1754, it was one of the earliest towns in the colony's backcountry. Hillsborough grew significantly due to its prominence as the Orange County seat, location of the courthouse, and its situation upon a major crossroads of the Trading Path from Petersburg, Virginia to Salisbury, North Carolina. Here too were connections to Halifax and New Bern in the coastal region of North Carolina. The town quickly became the "political, social, and economic center of the whole backcountry."<sup>6</sup> Future Georgia Congressman and then Hillsborough resident William Few described the town in 1764 as:

"The metropolis of the county, where courts were held and all the public business was done. It was a small village, which contained about thirty or forty inhabitants, with two or three small stores and two or three ordinary taverns, but it was an improving village. Several Scotch merchants were soon after induced to establish stores that contained a good assortment of European merchandise, which changed the state of things for the better. A church, courthouse and jail were built, but there was no parson or physician. Two or three attorneys opened their offices and found employment."<sup>7</sup>

French surveyor Claude Sauthier, who drew the Town of Hillsborough in 1768 (Fig. 2), illustrates Few's description. Sauthier includes the major features of the town, including the Episcopal church, court house, jail, market house, mills, spring, and even the race ground.<sup>8</sup> As historian T.H. Breen has noted, racetracks, gambling, and the eighteenth-century southern gentry were tightly associated.<sup>9</sup> This further supports Hillsborough's importance in these early years.

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<sup>6</sup> Catherine W. Bishir and Michael T. Southern, *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Piedmont North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>7</sup> William Few, "Autobiography of Colonel William Few of Georgia," *Magazine of American History* 7 (November 1881): 344.

<sup>8</sup> C.J. Sauthier, "Plan of the town of Hillsborough in the State of North Carolina." [map reproduction] October 1768.

<sup>9</sup> T.H. Breen, "Horses and Gentlemen: The Cultural Significance of Gambling Among the Gentry of Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup>. Ser., Vol. 34, No. 2, Apr. 1977, 239-257.

As a result of Hillsborough's fast growth, it became a center for conflict and state politics in the 1770s and 1780s. The Regulator Movement, composed of unhappily taxed farmers and peasants, culminated in the 1771 Battle of Alamance and the trial and execution that followed.<sup>10</sup> Hillsborough would go on to host the North Carolina Provincial Congress in 1775 and, after independence was declared, the state legislatures in 1778 and 1782. In these years Thomas Burke (ca.1744-1783) rose to prominence. Burke moved to Hillsborough in 1772 and settled on his farm, Tyaquin, just north of town. He served North Carolina as a delegate in the Provincial Congress in 1775, a member of the Continental Congress from 1777 to 1781 and Governor from 1781 to 1782 but resigned after just ten months. He died shortly thereafter, in 1783, leaving a widow and an infant daughter.<sup>11</sup>

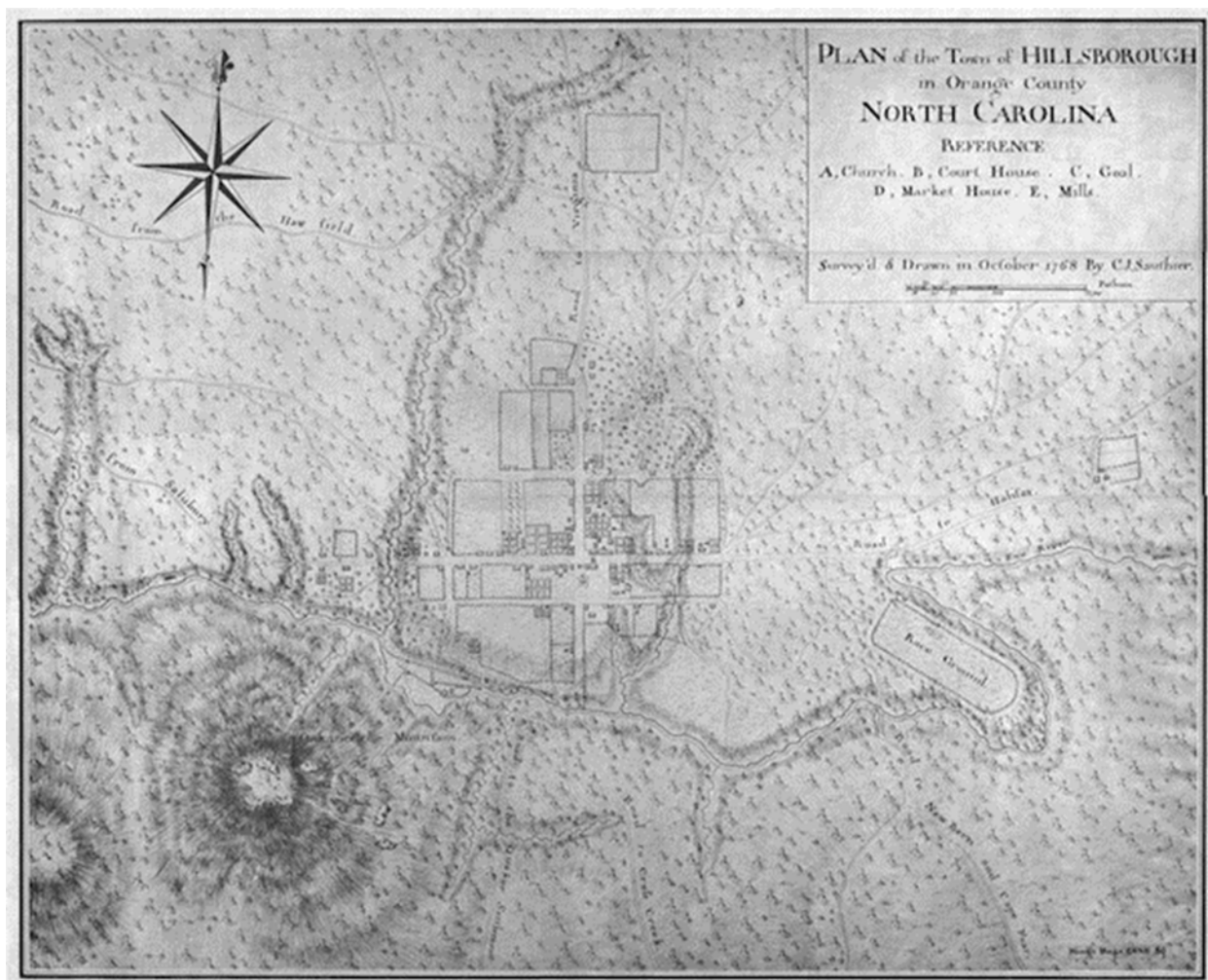


Figure 2

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<sup>10</sup> Marjoleine Kars, *Breaking Loose Together: The Regulator Rebellion in Pre-Revolutionary North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001)

<sup>11</sup> "Thomas Burke," North Carolina History Project, last modified 2012, <http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/399/entry>

Hillsborough lost any hope of officially being named the State Capital when it failed to ratify the U.S. Constitution during the 1788 State Convention.<sup>12</sup> The convention reconvened the following year in Fayetteville and the Constitution was ratified. Then, in 1792, Raleigh was developed as the State Capital and the University of North Carolina was formed in the town of Chapel Hill.<sup>13</sup> Though no longer a center for state politics, Hillsborough remained an important center for trade and commerce but experienced a slower growth and development.



Figure 3<sup>14</sup>



Figure 4<sup>15</sup>



Figure 5<sup>16</sup>



Figure 6<sup>17</sup>



Figure 7<sup>18</sup>



Figure 8<sup>19</sup>



Figure 9<sup>20</sup>



Figure 10<sup>21</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Allen Alexander Lloyd and Pauline O. Lloyd, *History of the Town of Hillsborough, 1754-1982* (Hillsborough, NC: Self-published, 1982), 73.

<sup>13</sup> Bishir and Southern

<sup>14</sup> MESDA Object Database, s-5148.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, s-5149.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, s-3748.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, s-3747.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, s-27921.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, s-3087.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, s-3086.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, s-3085.

In 1795 Dr. James Webb (1774-1855) arrived in Orange County as a student at the University of North Carolina. He established himself as a physician, merchant, and philanthropist in Hillsborough in 1799. He would later help found the North Carolina State Medical Society as well as several schools in Hillsborough. In preparation for his marriage in 1807, he purchased five one-acre lots in Hillsborough, where he built his house, medical office and barn.<sup>22</sup>

In 1810 Governor Burke's daughter, Mary Williams "Polly" Burke (1782-1869), purchased the house and lot adjacent to Dr. Webb. By 1817 Miss Burke and the Webb family had become friends. Dr. Webb agreed to sell a portion of his land to Miss Burke and build her a log schoolhouse to teach the Webb's nine children and his neighbor's children. "Miss Polly Burke's School" was in operation from about 1818 to 1834, when Miss Burke sold most of her household goods and moved to Marion, Alabama with her niece's family. In 1837 Miss Burke named Dr. James Webb her power of attorney to dispose of her remaining Hillsborough property and belongings.<sup>23</sup>

This history suggests that Dr. Webb does indeed acquire the table from the Burkes. However, it is unlikely that Dr. Webb received the table as a gift from Governor Burke because Governor Burke died when Dr. Webb was only nine years old. Dr. Webb and Governor Burke's daughter, Miss Polly Burke, were close acquaintances and it is more likely that Dr. Webb acquired the MESDA table either directly or through the sale of her possessions. The legend of little Jimmy Webb's dressing table has simply been overstated by one generation.



Figure 11<sup>24</sup>



Figure 12<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> William Stevens Powell, *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography Volume 6 T-Z* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 144-145

<sup>23</sup> William Stevens Powell, *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography Volume 1 A-C* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 279-280.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, s-5615.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, s-5616.



Figure 13<sup>26</sup>



Figure 14<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the dressing table, it is probable that Polly Burke also owned chairs later attributed to the “Hillsborough School”. Local newspaper publisher Dennis Heartt purchased the Burke property in 1837, renamed it “Heartsease”, and added to the house. At this time Heartt likely purchased furniture from Burke as well. MESDA has records of two corner chairs (Fig. 3-4) and two side chairs (Fig. 5-6) with a Heartsease provenance. An additional corner chair (Fig. 7) also descended in the Webb family with the same reputed story of having once belonged to Governor Burke but was likely acquired by the Webb’s through Miss Burke. Additionally, MESDA has identified another corner chair (Fig. 8) and five side chairs (Fig. 9-10) as part of the “Hillsborough School.” Each of these chairs share some common elements, including: Marlborough legs, intricate pierced or ribbed splats, shaped crest rails, reeded stiles, inverted hearts, and the use of walnut as the primary wood.<sup>28</sup>

MESDA curators have also attributed two additional dressing tables (Fig. 11-12), one dining table (Fig. 13), and one desk (Fig. 14) to the “Hillsborough School.” Each of these share common features, including: baluster-turned tapered legs, ball-and-claw or pad feet, scalloped or astragal-carved skirts, and the use of walnut as the primary wood. The two dressing tables and dining table were recorded as having descended in the family of Richard Bennehan.<sup>29</sup>

Richard Bennehan (1743-1825) moved to North Carolina from Virginia in 1762 and operated a store about fifteen miles northeast of Hillsborough. Bennehan was a successful merchant and by 1800 he owned over 4,000 acres of land and 44 slaves at his Stagville Plantation. His oldest daughter, Rebecca, married Hillsborough lawyer Duncan Cameron (1777-1853) in 1803 and they proceeded to construct their home named “Fairntosh” in 1810.<sup>30</sup> The dining table from the “Hillsborough School” was recorded with a history from “Fairntosh”.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly enough, Cameron acquired his Hillsborough property from Dr. James Webb in 1800; then in 1803 Webb served as a second in a duel Cameron fought and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, s-3089.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, nn-270.

<sup>28</sup> MESDA Object Database, s-3085, s-3086, s-3087, s-3747, s-3748, s-5148, s-5149, and s-27921.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, nn-270, s-3089, s-5615, s-5616.

<sup>30</sup> Bishir and Southern, 215.

<sup>31</sup> MESDA Object Database, s-3089.

won with another Hillsborough lawyer.<sup>32</sup> Cameron's son, Paul Cameron (1808-1891), also practiced law in Hillsborough and in 1834 constructed his home "Burnside" on the outskirts of town.<sup>33</sup> MESDA recorded the final two dressing tables from the "Hillsborough School" at this property. Who was the possible carpenter working in Hillsborough from 1765 to 1785 that constructed furniture as well?

The MESDA Craftsman Database records thirteen carpenters or cabinetmakers working near Hillsborough prior to 1790. Only one of these craftsmen, Martin Palmer (1742-1832), has a direct connection to any members of the Burke, Webb, Bennehan or Cameron families of Hillsborough. In 1787, Palmer worked for Richard Bennehan and built his Stagville store, lumberhouse and shed. Then, in 1790 Palmer likely began construction on Bennehan's main house at Stagville.<sup>34</sup>

Martin Palmer arrived from Bertie County, North Carolina and first appeared in public records in Bertie County in 1766.<sup>35</sup> By 1771 he moved to Orange County where he was listed in the militia rolls. According to the 1779 tax list he was worth over 2,000 pounds, approximately \$350,000 today.<sup>36</sup> Records show he first purchased land in 1785 in a Quaker farming community north of Hillsborough, and then in 1795 acquired property in town.<sup>37</sup> Between 1800 and 1830 he owned ten to fifteen slaves who worked at his farm. Although it is not recorded, some of these slaves may have been trained to assist Palmer in his woodworking trade.<sup>38</sup>

Palmer is recorded often in official Orange County records as a house carpenter and house joiner. His wealth and numerous court-appointed projects demonstrate that his woodworking skills earned him a solid reputation. In addition to the structures he built for Bennehan, Palmer also built "Hardscrabble" for William Cain in 1790. He also made repairs and conversions to several colonial buildings following the revolution, including the Orange County Courthouse in 1784. He remodeled the St. Matthews Episcopal Church in 1784 and most significantly, the Blue House Store in 1790, where Palmer is recorded as having built shelves and a table while serving as a carpenter and joiner.<sup>39</sup>

Martin Palmer's son, William Palmer (1762-ca.1842), followed in his father's footsteps as a carpenter but also practiced as a cabinetmaker. In 1799, he built a writing table for the merchants Hogg and Adam. Then in 1802 he built several pieces of furniture for Duncan

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<sup>32</sup> William Stevens Powell, *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography Volume 1 A-C* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 311.

<sup>33</sup> Bishir and Southern, 224.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Bradley Anderson, *Piedmont Plantation: The Bennehan-Cameron Family and Lands in North Carolina* (Durham, NC: The Historic Preservation Society of Durham, 1985), 9-11.

<sup>35</sup> "Martin Palmer," North Carolina Architects & Builders: A Biographical Dictionary, last modified 2011, <http://www.ncarchitects.lib.ncsu.edu/people/P000512>.

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Hume, "A Remarkable Combination for Construction in Early Orange County, North Carolina: Martin Palmer and *Palladio Londonensis*," *The Hillsborough Historical Society Journal*, Vol. 7 No. 1, Winter 2004, 50

<sup>37</sup> Orange County Land Grant Records

<sup>38</sup> "Martin Palmer"

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 70.



Cameron.<sup>40</sup> There is no evidence that William served as an apprentice to a cabinetmaker, suggesting that William likely learned the woodworking trades from his father Martin in the mid- to late-1770's. It is likely that a carpenter or joiner would also make furniture in the eighteenth-century backcountry of North Carolina. In Bertie County, William Seay, otherwise known as the W.H. Cabinetmaker, was recorded as a house carpenter and house joiner and is better known through his signed furniture.<sup>41</sup> Martin Palmer and his son William were capable of operating one of eighteenth-century Hillsborough's most prolific cabinetmaking shops<sup>42</sup> and are recorded as having worked for the gentile owners of some of the furniture categorized by the "Hillsborough School". Therefore, the attribution of the MESDA table to Martin or William Palmer is entirely plausible assuming the 1765 to 1785 period of construction is correct.

This research provides a plausible history demonstrating the descent of the MESDA table from the Burke to the Webb family in Hillsborough. It also presents evidence attributing the "Hillsborough School" of furniture to Martin and William Palmer, father and son woodworkers, and describes objects and characteristics associated with the "Hillsborough School". Although this school was identified decades ago, little progress has been made in the development of its story. For this topic to be further explored, an examination of the Quaker records in Orange County may prove useful as Martin Palmer lived in a Quaker community and maintained a farm there throughout his life. A visit to the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina would also be imperative. The Collection contains the papers of Governor Thomas Burke, Dr. James Webb, Richard Bennehan, Duncan Cameron, and other prominent Hillsborough citizens. New discoveries of furniture or services performed by Martin or William Palmer may be included in the papers, or a firmer attribution could be determined based on new evidence. Finally, the "Hillsborough School" of furniture and the furniture MESDA has recorded and attributed to Hillsborough in the 1795 to 1825 period, should be inspected for signatures or any details that may further these newly discovered connections.

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<sup>40</sup> *Cameron Papers*, #133, Southern Historical Collection. MESDA Craftsman Database.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas R.J. Newbern and James R. Melchor, *WH Cabinetmaker: A Southern Mystery Solved* (Benton, KY: Legacy Ink Publishing, 2009), 13.

<sup>42</sup> Luke Beckerdite and John Bivins, "New additions to the collection: furniture as reflections of regional settlement patterns," *The MESDA Luminary*, Winter 1986, 4-5.

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