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OLD YORK ACQUIRES RARE 17TH-CENTURY CHEST OF DRAWERS

York, Maine—Old York Historical Society (OYHS) has purchased a rare Boston chest of drawers that descended in the Weare Family of Cape Neddick, Maine.

The chest of drawers, known as the Weare Chest, was made between 1680 and 1700, and is attributed to the Mason-Messinger shop tradition. Ralph Mason (1599–1679) and Henry Messinger (died 1681) were London-trained joiners (cabinetmakers) who began working in Boston in the 1630s. Their sons were trained in the craft, and continued making London-style furniture in Boston. While the Mason-Messinger Shop is considered the top cabinet-making shop in 17th century Boston, relatively few of their high-style chests of drawers survive. The Weare Chest is one of finest known chests of drawers produced by the shop tradition.

The presence of the chest in the York area is well documented. It descended through the family of Peter Weare, Sr. (1618–1692), an early resident of York and Cape Neddick, to his sixth great-granddaughter, Virginia Weare Parsons (1920–2017). The chest was sold at auction by Virginia Parsons' estate in 2017, and subsequently sold in 2021 by a North Carolina auction house to a private collector in Florida. OYHS staff contacted the collector through the auction house, and over a period of months negotiated the purchase of the chest.

Securing the chest of drawers for the collection was made possible through the Virginia and Robert Parsons Collections Fund bequeathed to OYHS by Virginia Parsons in 2017. When the Parsons estate sold the chest in 2017, OYHS did not have the financial resources to purchase significant objects and had not yet received the bequest of the Parsons Collections Fund.

Chests of drawers are documented infrequently in early York households. Research into the wills and estate inventories of members of the Weare family reveal that the chest of drawers likely came into the possession of the Weares around the time of the 1763 marriage of Joseph Weare (1734–1830) and Elizabeth Stone (1735–1804). Joseph was the great-grandson of Peter Weare, Sr., and his wife Elizabeth was the daughter of Benjamin Stone (1690–1773), a shipwright and innkeeper who was born in Boston in 1690 and settled in York around 1712. Stone built a large house at 192 York Street that still stands, and his will

in 1773 lists furniture, likely made in Boston, including “my Table and Chest of Drawers and large looking glass.”

“The Weare Chest is a major addition to Old York’s collection,” says Joel Lefever, OYHS executive director. “York was the seat of government in Colonial Maine, and the town’s survival following the Candlemas Raid of 1692 meant that Maine remained part of New England. Only a handful of objects owned by York residents before 1715 are known, and the addition of the Weare Chest will help us to better interpret the early period of York’s English settlement.”

The chest currently is on exhibit in the Remick Gallery of the Old York Museum Center and Virginia Weare Parsons Education Center, 3 Lindsay Road, York.

ABOUT OLD YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

OYHS is a vital part of the York, Maine, community. The organization maintains 16 buildings and 20 properties including the 17-acre Steedman Woods; employs 5 full-time and 25 part-time employees; houses more than 20,000 artifacts and 50,000 archival materials; and serves thousands of people year round through tours, educational programs, and special events. OYHS receives no Federal, State, or Municipal support, and relies on funding provided through private donations, a modest endowment, and a trust established by Elizabeth Perkins, as well as earned income from ticket sales, programs, memberships.

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