

John Shaw, cabinetmaker

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IN MARYLAND IT IS OFTEN REMARKED with pride, "We think this is a Shaw piece." John Shaw (1745-1829) is probably little known outside the limits of the state, but since there are few cabinetmakers in the South who can be credited with handsome pieces made before the War for Independence he is worthy of respect and continued research.

Twenty years ago John Shaw was the cause of controversy among antiques authorities. Some felt that his label did not necessarily mean he had made a given piece, and that his advertisements in *The Maryland Gazette and Baltimore General Advertiser* proved that he was an importer. Shaw was an importer, as were most well-to-do colonial cabinetmakers—certainly those who lived on the seaboard. Any man with good credit became an importer to some extent, and Shaw catered to the taste and pocketbooks of the Annapolis gentry. One of his advertisements proclaimed importations of "looking-glasses, tea-chests, pictures framed, maps and billiard balls." At other times he was anxious to sell a cargo of sugar, or cabinetmakers' tools, or lengths of lumber, and once he announced that he had for sale "an engine for extinguishing fires, worked by four men but needs six, throws water upward 40 feet high, exceedingly useful for watering gardens." But it would appear that he had

no need to advertise the lovely household pieces which he is best known. Certainly, with a shop and apprentices, he did not have to import them.

To the confusion of researchers, there were in Maryland at the same moment six John Shaws, two of them in Annapolis. When the doctor is separated from the country planters, and all of them from the cabinetmaker, there emerges a versatile man.

According to his tombstone in St. Anne's Cemetery in Annapolis, John Shaw, cabinetmaker, was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1745. Vestry records of St. Anne's Church show that he was twice married, both times in Annapolis, and lived to be eighty-four. His trade must have been taught him in the old country: there are several John Shaws on the Glasgow guild lists. When and how he arrived in Maryland is unknown. There is a "John Schaw," an eligible bachelor, listed for tax purposes by the vestry as early as 1763. The first that is known of the firm of Shaw & Chisholm, chair- and cabinetmakers, is their notice in the *Maryland Gazette* for February 23, 1773, that a musical-instrument maker established at their shop. There must have been early announcements to the public about their wares but the *Gazette* does not reveal them. Little can be discovered about Archibald Chisholm, the partner, except that

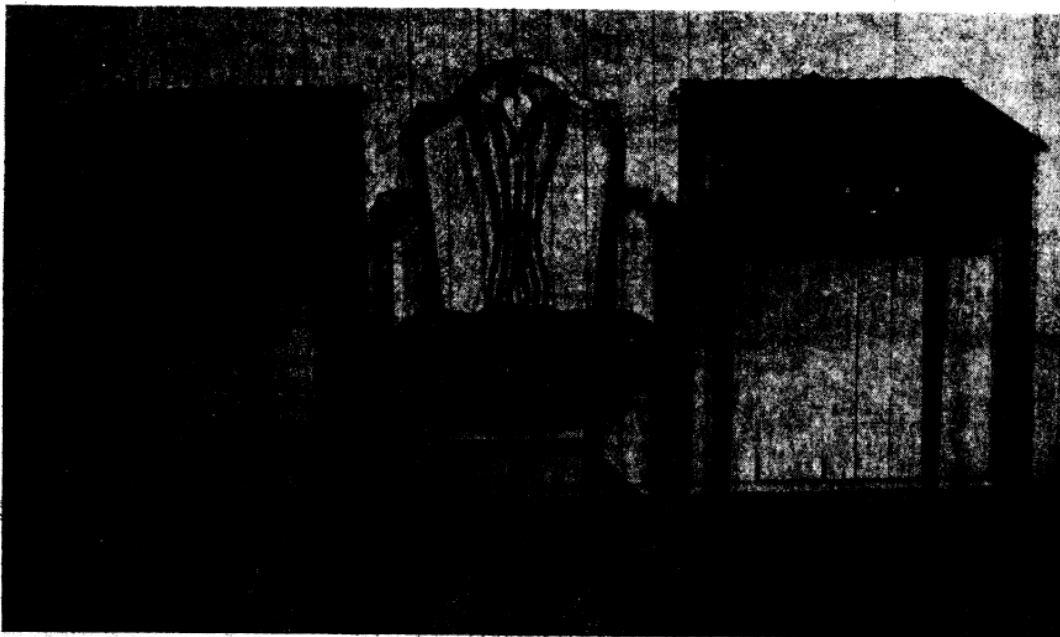


Fig. 1. Desks and armchair, made by John Shaw (Annapolis, 1745-1829) for Maryland Senate chamber. Matching side chair was illustrated in *ANTIQUES* for September 1934, 208. *Old Senate Chamber, Maryland State House.*

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Fig. 2. Clerks' desk made by Shaw for Senate chamber. Masonic Museum, Baltimore; photograph by Hughes Company.

appears to have been a bad businessman—and more interested, perhaps, in musical instruments than in furniture. He and Shaw agreed to dissolve the partnership in 1776: “each party intends carrying on their business in Cabinet and chairmaking as formerly.”

Shaw's first documented piece of furniture is a pine bookcase “with 3 drawers, sliding partitions and Pigeon Holes” made for the colony's Loan Office in 1775 for six pounds. This was his first piece of official business with the state he was to serve for many years.

Midway in a war that was settling down in desperate earnest, John Shaw forsook his cabinetwork to become state armorer at a salary of ninety pounds semiannually. Sixty-five times he is mentioned in the published archives of Maryland, and he seems to have been ordnance, quartermaster, and engineer corps rolled into one. When Smallwood's Battalion took part in the Southern campaign, Shaw was sometimes with it; when a fort for the defense of the Chesapeake had to be built, Shaw was involved. However, he was able to celebrate the end of the war as few others could do: on December 23, 1783, General Washington resigned his commission at Annapolis, and Shaw, who had been acting as State House superintendent, was in charge of the ball given to honor the occasion.

For many years Shaw continued his supervision of the state buildings on their hill at Annapolis. The old armory was eventually razed, as was the public privy he had built, and he was paid large sums for this work as well as for overseeing the painting and repair of the State House. All the Revolutionary weapons and matériel had to be rounded up and checked for future use by armorer Shaw, who advertised in July 1784 for “a Journeyman Gunsmith to clean and repair arms.”

If this were not enough to keep a man busy there was another side to cabinetwork which Shaw, like many others of his profession, practiced—the business of funeral directing. In ledgers and testamentary accounts are items connected with this activity, and a hearse and pall are listed in his inventory.

Fig. 3. Cellaret attributed to Shaw. Collection of Mrs. D. H. Gordon.

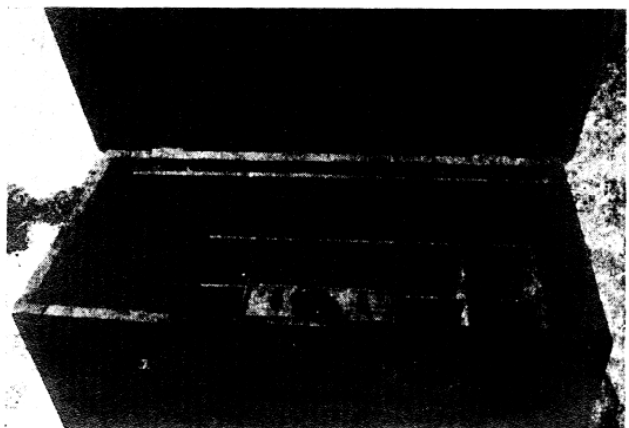
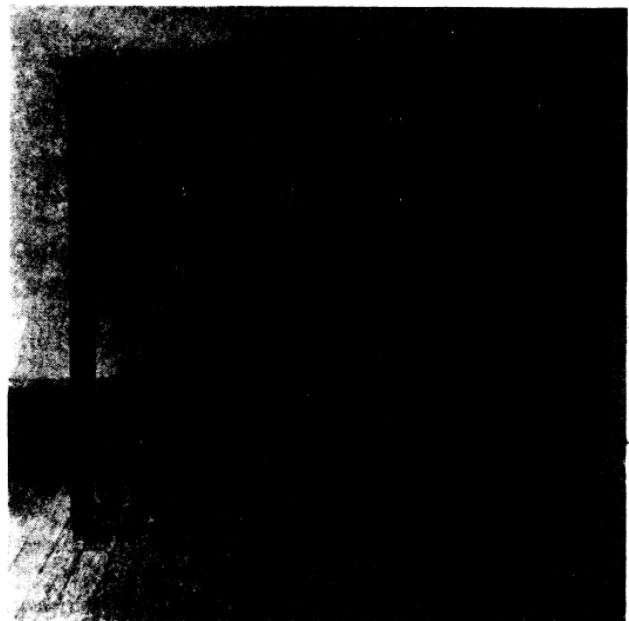


Fig. 4. Detail of labeled cellaret by Shaw. Collection of Mrs. Charles Webb; photograph by W. Bowdoin Davis Jr.

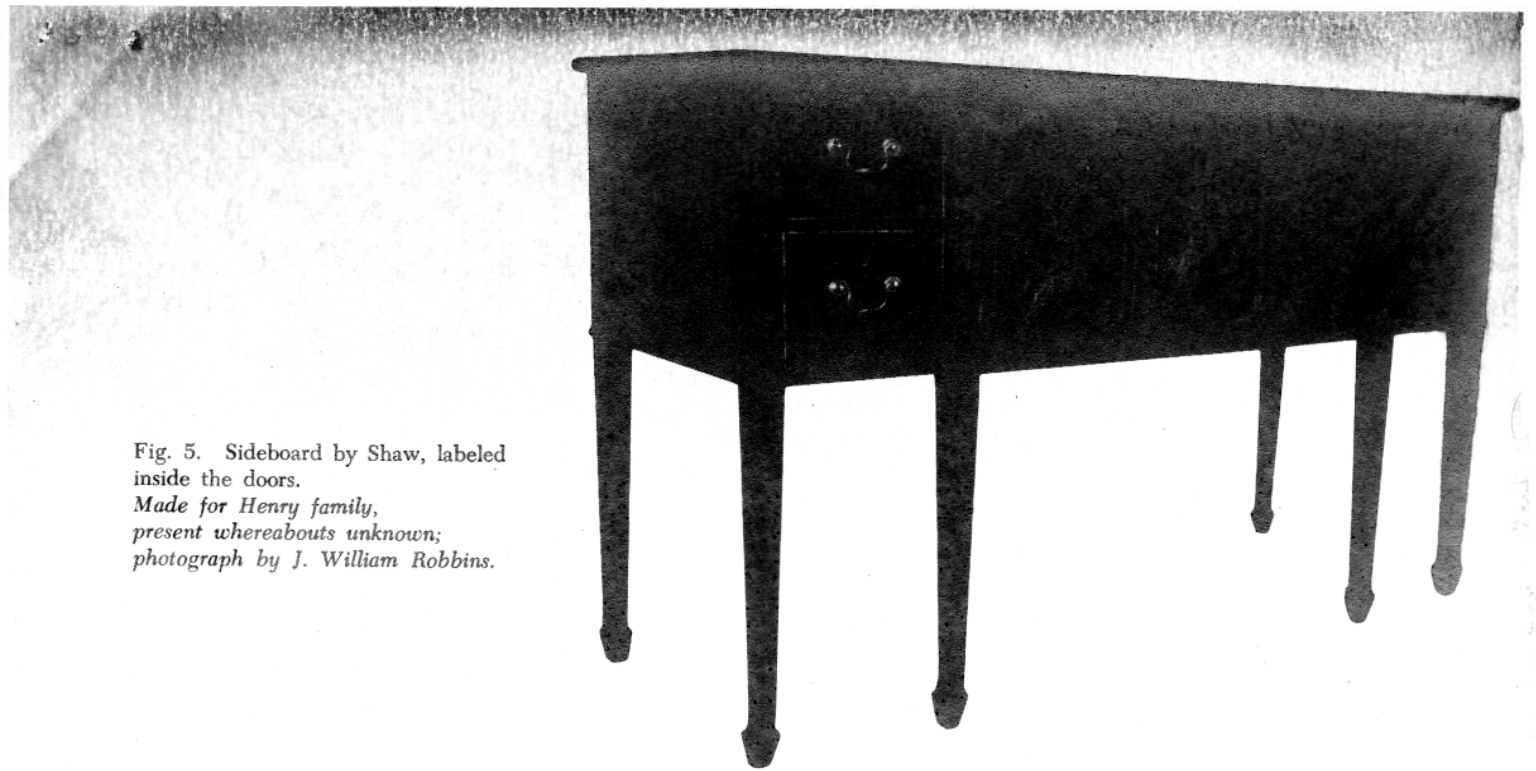


Fig. 5. Sideboard by Shaw, labeled inside the doors.
 Made for Henry family,
 present whereabouts unknown;
 photograph by J. William Robbins.

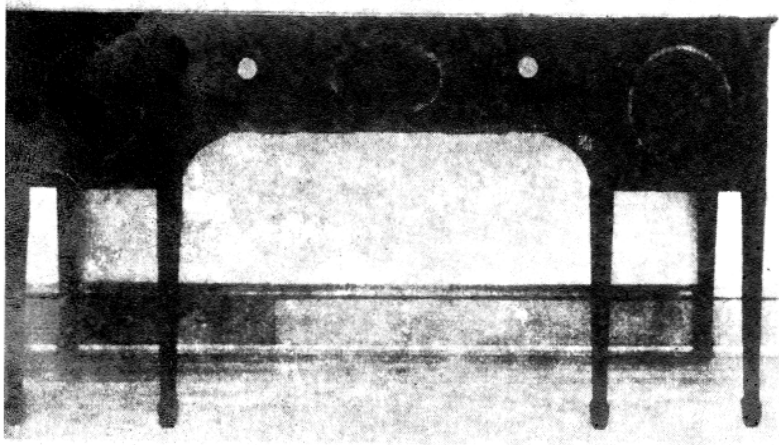


Fig. 6. Labeled sideboard by Shaw. *Baltimore Museum of Art.*

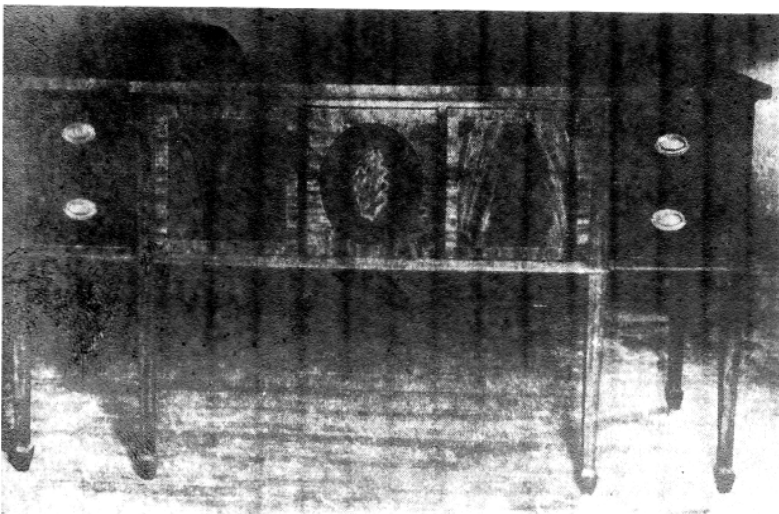


Fig. 7. Sideboard by Shaw; formerly labeled.
 Collection of Alexander Stewart; photograph by Guill.

After the war Shaw took on as apprentices three Annapolis youths of good family: Washington Tucker in 1797, Henry Lusby in 1800, and Jonathan Weed in 1806. This was the period of his best production. It was now that he completed a set of desks and chairs for the Senate chamber and fine armchairs upholstered in crimson moreen for the presiding officer and for the high court. Several of the delegates' chairs, as well as two of the desks, have survived (Fig. 1), and it has been possible by copying them to make the restored Senate chamber look approximately as it did originally. Two of the large upholstered chairs also remain. The complete semicircular double writing desk for the Senate clerk (Fig. 2) demonstrates Shaw's originality and craftsmanship.

In 1789 Shaw wrote to his wartime friend General Smallwood:

Sir—The Chairs you sent to be repaired had been done ever since the second week after they came here. I saw Lazarus the packet man Some time ago who promised to call for them the first time he was going to Potowmack but he has not done it yet—Your sideboard table is done all but the top, for which I have sent to Philadelphia for the Best piece of mahogany that can be got to make it of—I shall be glad you would send to the glass man about the bottles as I expect to finish the table very soon. I shall esteem it a particular favour if [you] will be so kind as to send up the balance of your Account as I am very much distressed for want of cash at present.

This letter, with the ledger record of John Davidson, merchant, for the making of six chairs, the archive record of the state orders, the testamentary records of two other pieces, and the bill for a desk made for Wye House, are the only documentation of Shaw's handiwork so far discovered. However, pieces bearing the Shaw label engraved by Thomas Sparrow of Annapolis are still to be found in a few old Anne Arundel County houses and in local collections. Four were shown in the exhibition *Baltimore Furniture 1760-1810* at the Baltimore Museum in 1947, and four more, without the label but having

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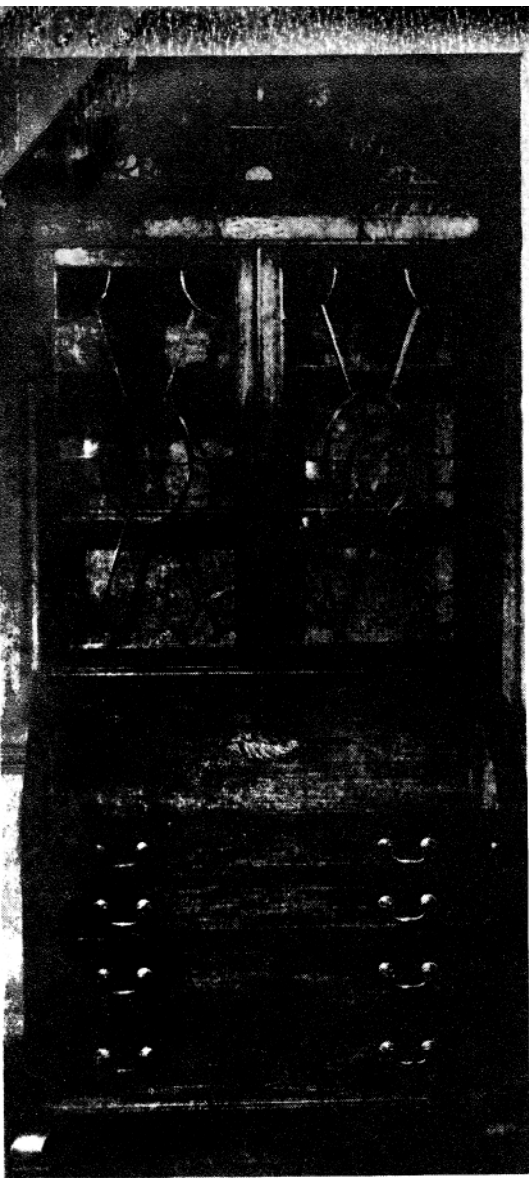


Fig. 8. Secretary made by Shaw for John Randall of Annapolis; labeled. On loan to Baltimore Museum of Art.

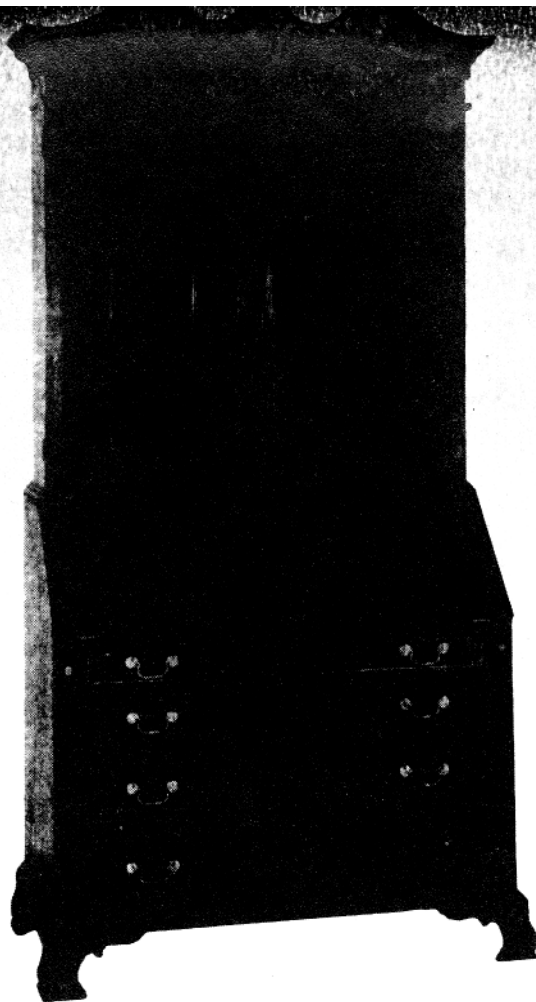


Fig. 9. Unlabeled secretary attributed to Shaw; veneer of slant front cut from same piece of wood as that on the labeled Randall secretary. John Schwarz; photograph by Dorsey Studios.

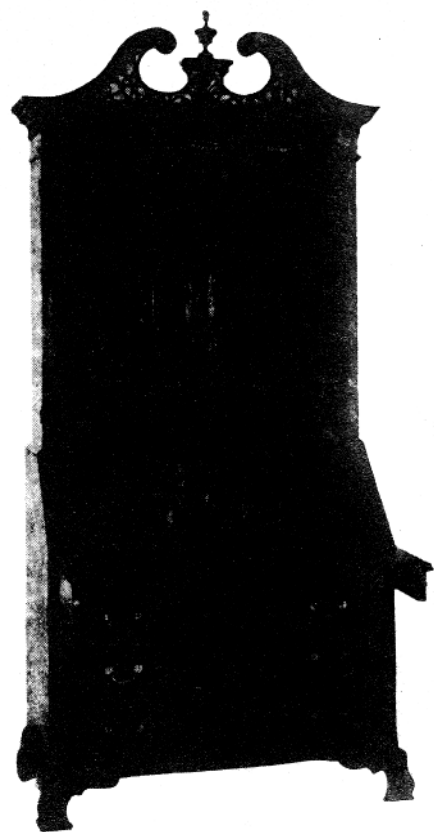


Fig. 10. Unlabeled secretary of Fig. 9, showing interior.

characteristics peculiar to this maker, were also included. Such attributable examples continue to turn up.

In 1784 John Shaw moved from a house near the city dock to a much more pretentious one on the State House Circle. This house, still bearing his name, has recently been purchased by the state and its preservation is assured. It appears in the first tax records (1798) as "Brick Dwelling 50 x 20, Single Story with a Back Elbow of Brick 18 x 12 single story. Brick Smoak House 8 x 8. Frame Shop 30 x 26. Value £750." Here Shaw is also credited with seven slaves, though only three were of working age and therefore taxable.

As Shaw grew older he resigned the work at the State House and became actively interested in the Episcopal church. A new St. Anne's, begun before the Revolution, was not finished until 1792. He had only a small part in the building, but by 1796, when he was elected to the vestry, he was deep in all its problems. Serving eight terms as vestryman and seven as warden, he supervised the maintenance and repair of the property until a few years before his death. One job calling for all

his skill was the making of a decorative sounding board over the pulpit.

When troubled times came again to the Chesapeake Bay, Shaw, now sixty-nine years old, was called on to organize once more the state's military supplies. He defends his losses in the following letter to the governor written five years after the event:

December 4, 1819. On the alarm that the Enemy was at Queen Anne they [guns] were tied up in tents and hurried aboard a vessel with a number of other articles to be carried to the Indian Landing and was left on the shore for several Days and what was returned was cutt and abused very much. The Hurrey and Bustle to get records and military Stores away was so great that no acct. could be taken of them—the object was to get them out of the way of the Enemy.

At the time of his death (February 26, 1829) the *Maryland Gazette* gave Shaw the customary long and laudatory obituary. However, his name has been remembered not for his work as a useful citizen, nor for his invention of a scale to weigh hay, but solely for the beauty of his furniture.

In style this falls, almost without exception, into a transitional period between Chippendale and Hepplewhite. There is solidness and strength offset by such good proportion that the impression is one of lightness and grace. Line inlay and tapered legs heighten this effect. The crispness of the carving on sturdy chair backs and on the bonnets of secretaries, the finely molded tops of tables and chests of drawers, are in the Chippendale tradition, but elaborate panels of inlay, tapering legs, and

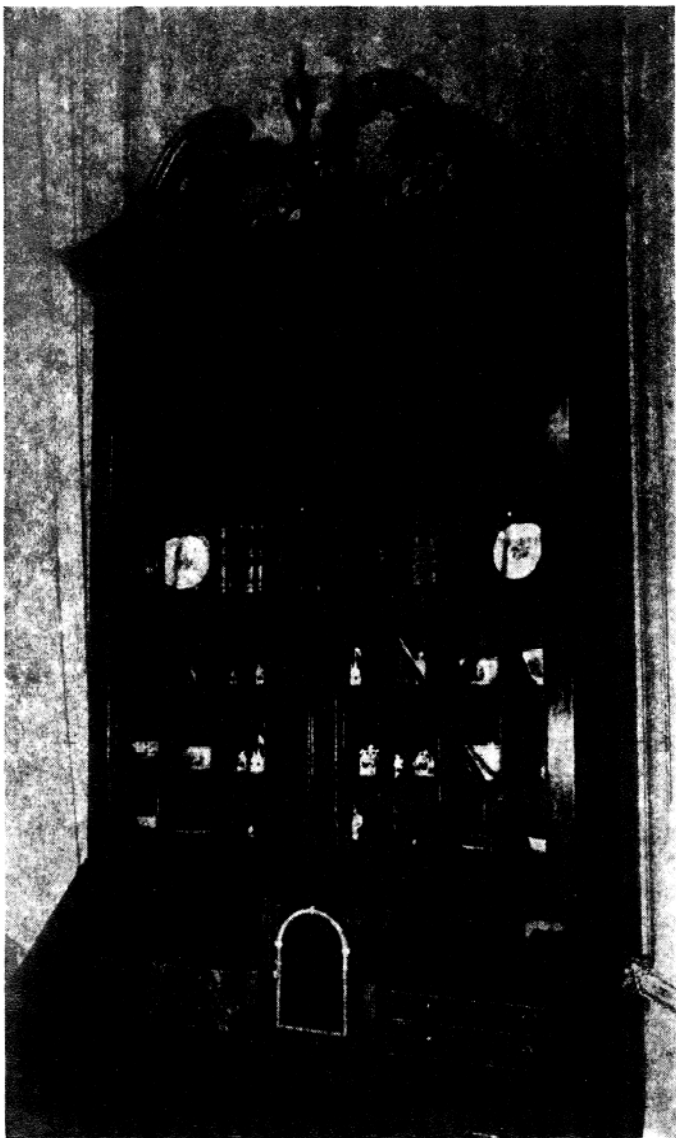
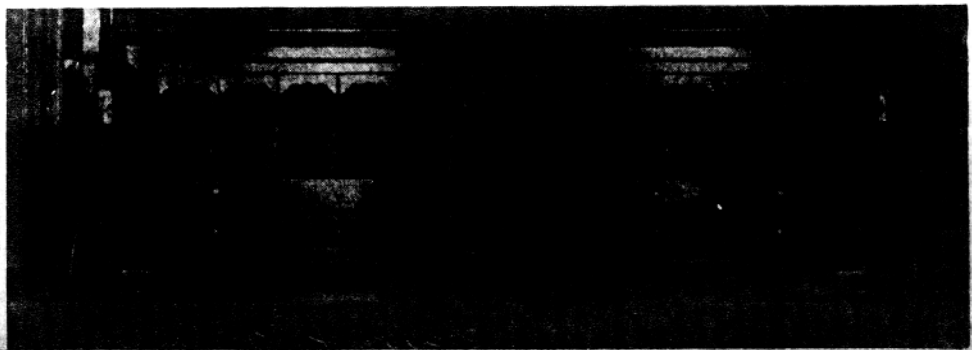


Fig. 11. Unlabeled secretary (detail) attributed to Shaw; made for Edward Lloyd IV of Wye House, Easton, Maryland, and documented by bill of sale. Interior similar to those of Figs. 8, 10, and 12. Cupboard base has one drawer and two doors. Collection of Mrs. Morgan Schiller.

Fig. 12. Labeled bureau desk (detail) by Shaw. Interior virtually identical to that of Fig. 11. Schiller collection.



the use of imported woods in cross-banding and other veneers show his progressive interest in the Hepplewhite-Sheraton styles.

The chief characteristics of Shaw's furniture are the ovoid spade foot, molded top edges, and such individual treatment of the fundamental structure as the cross-grained support at the rear of the bracket foot to give added strength (a feature found on all the secretaries and desks). Drawers usually had long tailpieces extending from the sides to keep them in balance when pulled out. The unusual spade foot occurs on many sideboards, huntboards, and tables, where the finely molded edge, too, is most often found.

Shaw used the best imported West Indies mahogany for his surfaces but secondary woods were those common to Anne Arundel County. Drawers were usually of poplar, often with yellow pine bottoms; frames of chairs, tables, and sideboards were strengthened with white oak. For his elaborate inlay he used the usual satinwood, green dyes, and burnt woods of the period, supplementing these with zebra wood from Africa and tulipwood from the West Indies brought into this country with the slave trade.

Shaw's designs, which have a strong Maryland flavor, were repeated with slight variations on most of his important pieces. The four sideboards listed include the Shaw characteristics of the ovoid foot on six legs and generous oval inlay on the doors. He does not seem to have used the bellflower inlay so common in Maryland furniture, depending instead on bold medallions of conch shells, acorns with leaves, fans, or eagles, and cross-banding of rare woods set off by line inlay. The secretaries have almost identical broken-arch tops combining fret carving and inlay (Figs. 8, 9). Two desks at Wye House have identical interiors, although one has a bookcase top and the other is a bureau desk (Figs. 11, 12). Similar interior design appears in two other secretaries, one of which is labeled. The dimensions of drawers and shelf tops of the secretaries are identical and in two of them the unusual veneered fall-boards are cut from the same piece of wood (Figs. 8, 9). Shaw's chairs are highly individual, though he uses the shield back as the point of departure. All are upholstered over the frame with comfortable seats of medium width and all have line inlay as decoration, even when there is carving on the crest rail or splat.

I am indebted to David Stockwell and Bryden Bordley Hyde for help in locating some of the examples of Shaw's work.