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HENRY CHAPMAN MERCER AND THE FURNITURE OF FONTHILL

by

Amber Auld Combs

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in Early American Culture

Summer 1998

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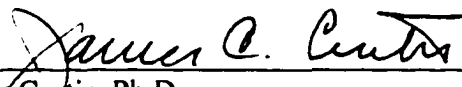
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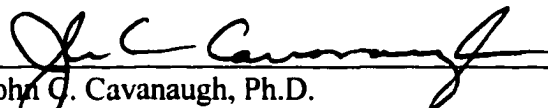
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ABSTRACT

Henry Chapman Mercer, born in Doylestown, Pennsylvania in 1856, was one of the earliest and most prolific contributors to the field of American material culture. In addition to his career as a lawyer, historian, archaeologist, and writer, he founded the Mercer Museum and the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works. Scholars recognize Mercer's achievements as a collector and connoisseur of early American tools, as well as a craftsman of decorative tiles. Little research has been done, however, into the significance of the forms and refinements of the furniture in Mercer's Doylestown home, Fonthill.

Mercer lived at Fonthill as a bachelor from 1912 until his death in 1930. As planner, architect, and chief builder, Mercer combined historic design and modern materials to fashion a house which was a unique blend of personal residence and commercial showroom. Under the direction of the Bucks County Historical Society, the building has been open to the public as a museum since 1975, with many of the furnishings remaining from Mercer's residency. This narrative explores the meaning of the furniture at Fonthill by using historic and contemporary documents relating to Mercer's life and times, probate and personal inventories, and a comprehensive survey of nearly one hundred extant furnishings in nine rooms of the house.

The furniture of Fonthill primarily consists of built-in concrete and mixed media objects, metal beds, Pennsylvania German tables and case pieces, wooden cupboards and bookcases, and Windsor seating forms, all painted in brilliant colors. This study reinterprets these often ignored furnishings as important reflections of period manners as expressed in the arts and crafts and colonial revival movements. The thesis also relates the style and treatment of the objects to Mercer's personal predilections, such as his mode of artistic and cultural experimentation, his interest in narrative folkways, his individual interpretation of prevailing social trends, and his use of artifacts as symbols of an idealized past. As the furniture of Fonthill is understood best as a product of the mind of Henry Chapman Mercer, the study concludes with an investigation of the importance of agency in material culture scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

Henry Chapman Mercer was one of the earliest and most prolific contributors to the study of American material culture. As a collector and connoisseur, Mercer categorized the form and function of objects. Mercer also was a craftsman who designed and fabricated numerous artifacts, including buildings and architectural tiles. Scholars acknowledge Mercer's curatorial activities in acquiring and analyzing artifacts for the Bucks County Historical Society. Other academic investigations focus on his artisanal work, either through his commercial production of decorative tiles or through the unique character of his architectural efforts. Few studies exist, however, which explore the significance of the forms and refinements of the furniture at his extant home, Fonhill. Often dismissed as crude, unsophisticated debris, Mercer's furnishings have not received the extensive examination afforded to his other creative endeavors. These objects are powerful statements, not only of prevailing social movements in the early twentieth century, but of Mercer's personal predilections. As such, the furniture of Fonhill deserves scrutiny as a material witness to important popular trends, and as an enduring testament of the peculiar personality of the master of the house, Henry Chapman Mercer.

Mercer's life was as varied and intriguing as the artifacts which survive him. He was born on June 24, 1856 in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, a town located approximately

thirty miles northwest of Philadelphia in Bucks County. His father, William Robert Mercer (1827-1917), was a graduate of the Naval School at Annapolis, and a naval officer whose hobbies included history and genealogy. Members of Doylestown's cultural elite knew the lineage of his mother, Mary Rebecca Chapman Mercer (1831-1903), very well. Her father had been a prominent area attorney, as well as a state senator, United States congressman, and a local judge.¹

For Mercer's early education, he attended boarding and military schools in Bucks County and New York state. As a teenager, he exhibited the passion for collecting which would become one of the hallmarks of his adult life. Letters and memoirs reveal that he would collect birds' eggs, arrowheads, and other Native American artifacts during his study breaks at school. In his formative years, Mercer enjoyed other educational experiences through European travels sponsored by his maternal aunt, Elizabeth Chapman Lawrence (1829-1905). "Aunt Lela," as the Mercer children called her, was the wife of Timothy Bigelow Lawrence, a wealthy Boston diplomat who served in London and Florence. In 1870, the fourteen-year old Mercer spent five months traveling through England, France, Germany, Italy, and Holland with his mother and aunt. During the trip, he encountered ancient castles on the Rhine and their historic appointments. The

¹ William and Mary Mercer had another son, William R. Mercer, Jr. (1862-1939), and a daughter, Elizabeth Mercer Fidler von Isarborn (1858-1919). Elizabeth's daughter, Walpurga, was their only surviving grandchild. Linda F. Dyke, *Henry Chapman Mercer: An Annotated Chronology* (Doylestown, Pennsylvania: Bucks County Historical Society, 1996), 1-3.

beauty and mystery of the aged architecture and artifacts made an astounding impression on the enthusiastic teenager.²

Mercer greatly appreciated the efforts of his Aunt Lela in providing for his domestic tranquillity as well as for this European excursion. When her husband died in 1869, the childless widow spent a large part of her inheritance on her young relations. In 1870, she financed the construction of a house in Doylestown for her sister's family. Called "'Aldie,'" the large mansion provided comfortable quarters for the Mercer clan. Aunt Lela also funded the Mercer children's education, and provided for their further travels.³

With the aid of his aunt, Mercer began his studies at Harvard University in 1875. His course work included required subjects such as Greek, Latin, German, physics, math, chemistry, and the classics. For five of his thirteen elective courses, however, he chose to pursue historical subjects including European, ecclesiastical, natural, and art history. His art history professor during his junior year was Charles Eliot Norton, one of the foremost figures of the Boston arts and crafts movement. Norton's teachings on arts and crafts principles and practices would have an enormous impact on Mercer's later life and

² Mercer's European trip in 1870 took him to London, Scotland, Paris, Baden-Baden, Munich, Innsbruck, Milan, Florence, Venice, Vienna, Prague, Dresden, Berlin, Amsterdam, The Hague, Cologne, Wiesbaden, Frankfurt, Heidelberg, Brussels, and Ostend. *Ibid.*, 3-5.

³ Aunt Lela's generosity was not limited to providing for her relations. She also was a founder of the Boston Museum of Art. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

works.⁴

Although it became a truly international phenomenon, the arts and crafts movement first flowered in England. Close to a century of industrially-produced goods, and the resulting decline in social conditions, sowed the seed of English aesthetic and domestic reform starting in the 1850s. People from all walks of cultural life, including John Ruskin, William Morris, and Augustus Pugin, rallied against the ruin of mankind and merchandise caused by mechanization. In 1909, American designer Ernest A. Batchelder summarized the rhetoric set forth by such reformers as “a protest against inutilities [*sic*], the ugliness, the sham and pretense of a great portion of the English industrial product of the day . . . [and also] a protest against the deplorable industrial conditions which that product represented.”⁵

To counteract the effects of industrialization, arts and crafts proponents longed for a return to a simpler, more natural society. They wanted goods which were “functional, made by hand, and expressive of the materials from which they were made (as honestly and directly as possible).”⁶ They believed that the craftsman should have a personal

⁴ Ibid., 6-7. Norton would become the first president of the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston in 1897. Bucks County Historical Society, “Interpretive Handbook, Fonthill Museum, 1993,” p. 6, Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

⁵ Batchelder’s statement as quoted in an article in *The Craftsman* from 1909. Danforth Museum of Art, *On the Threshold of Modern Design: The Arts and Crafts Movement in America* (Framingham, Massachusetts: Danforth Museum of Art, 1984), 8.

⁶ Cleota Reed Gabriel, *The Ward House: An Architect and His Craftsmen* (Syracuse, New York: The Institute for the Development of Evolutive Architecture, Inc., 1978), 11.

connection to the product of his labors, a relationship ruined by the mingling of machines and man in manufacturing. Hand craftsmanship, therefore, became the preferred means of production. The design of objects had to center around simplicity and utility. As a result, designs focused on the function of goods rather than their form, and the natural qualities of materials became the main method of decoration.

The arts and crafts movement spread to the United States in the later part of the nineteenth century. Americans understood the idealization of nonindustrial communities as expressed through the works of writers such as Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau; these authors preached “a back-basics lifestyle and extolled the benefits of a life led close to nature, and the virtues of manual skill and labor.”⁷ As Americans celebrated their colonial history at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, they had the opportunity to view the arts and crafts wallpaper, furniture, textiles, and metalwork of William Morris on display at the event. His expression of past crafts kept alive in the present fascinated a society already immersed in the glorification of old ways of life and work. As artists and entrepreneurs recognized this new-found admiration for craftsmanship, they began an enormous expansion of the production of handmade objects. Across the country, workers produced a wide variety of goods in the arts and crafts style. “Its promotion of simple good taste, naturalness, respect for

⁷ Barbara Mayer, *In the Arts and Crafts Style* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993), 27-31.

materials, and the favoring of indigenous regional design sources extended to dress, gardens, printing, and many other endeavors.”⁸ Charles Eliot Norton helped to expose Mercer to the tenets of the arts and crafts movement, and its precepts took hold in the young man’s consciousness just as they captured the imagination of the nation.

Upon his graduation from Harvard in 1879, Mercer returned to Doylestown. He continued to express the love of history indicated by his choice of academic classes. He helped found the Bucks County Historical Society in 1880, and completed a comprehensive study of “Dutch School” prints at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. In that same year, Mercer put his historical investigations on hold to pursue a career which was a significant part of his own ancestry. He studied law at the University of Pennsylvania Law School in Philadelphia; although admitted to the Philadelphia County Bar in 1881, Mercer never put his legal training into practice.⁹

The rest of the decade was a time for Mercer to travel throughout Europe and the United States. From 1881 to 1885, he visited England, France, Italy, Egypt, Corfu, Austria, and Germany. He examined historic sites in these countries, and published works on early American history and prehistoric archaeology. During his travels, he also documented and collected many of the objects which would furnish his domestic residences. In 1885, Mercer spent some time making a wagon journey from

⁸ Ibid., 12. Bucks County Historical Society, “Handbook,” 38-39.

⁹ Dyke, *Chronology*, 7.

Pennsylvania to Virginia, where he studied Civil War and Native American sites. Mercer continued to explore Europe, often traveling by houseboat, for the remainder of the 1880s. During this decade, he discovered that he had contracted gonorrhea, a disease which would trouble him throughout the remainder of his life.¹⁰

After returning to the United States, Mercer became one of ten managers of the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Science and Art in 1891. At the museum and at digs around the world, he continued to study and write about prehistoric archaeology. He hoped that his studies would uncover evidence that humans existed in North America as early as the ice age. His efforts earned him the position of Curator of American and Prehistoric Archaeology at the museum in 1894. After studying caves in the United States and Mexico and failing to find any evidence of prehistoric peoples in the Americas, Mercer felt that his career in archaeology was a failure. His disappointment, coupled with increasing conflicts of personality at the museum, caused him to leave his post and return to Doylestown in 1897.¹¹

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Mercer began two of the most defining undertakings of his varied career. While visiting country sales around Bucks County, he

¹⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

¹¹ During his career as an archaeologist, Mercer studied Paleolithic sites in France and Spain, as well as caves in Tennessee and the Yucatan. His archaeological work yielded numerous publications and received high praise; the exhibit he designed for the Columbian Historical Exposition in Spain in 1893 won him a bronze medal from the exposition's *Junta Directiva*. Ibid., 11-14.

noticed that craftsmen and farmers were discarding huge quantities of hand tools as they turned towards more mechanized methods of production. As an archaeologist, Mercer recognized the importance of artifacts in understanding past cultures. Looking at these tools, he began to see a link between the forms and designs of the implements being discarded and those from ancient civilizations. He believed that one could study the modern examples and work backward to determine the function of tools since antiquity. This method would be a new type of archaeology to replace traditional ways of observing the remains of old tools and drawing similarities to current objects. Such an idea, in Mercer's words, was "archaeology turned upside down, reversed, revolutionized."¹² He began to collect, study, and exhibit numerous kinds of tools offered for sale in the Doylestown area.

Through his tool collection, Mercer had returned to his college interests in history and the arts and crafts movement. Not only did he believe that these implements were important because they could provide links to the ancient past, but they could chronicle the history of early American life as well. He viewed the artifacts from these "penny lots" as a new version of Pennsylvania history, with himself as the historian who could tell their three-dimensional story.¹³ Such a tale had a social as well as a scholastic purpose: it had to be told for the edification of a society in which industrialization was

¹² Ibid., 14.

¹³ Joseph E. Sandford, *Henry Chapman Mercer: A Study* (Doylestown, Pennsylvania: Bucks County Historical Society, 1971), 7.

making craft practices obsolete. The appreciation of hand craftsmanship through the study of tools could help return people to the simpler, preindustrial wholesomeness arts and crafts advocates desired. For nearly thirty years, Mercer "amassed, categorized, catalogued, and studied a collection of over 30,000 preindustrial tools and other implements."¹⁴ Mercer donated his collection to the Bucks County Historical Society, and funded the creation of a building in which to house and display it. The structure, known as the Mercer Museum, was built in Doylestown in 1916 and continues to operate today.¹⁵

Mercer's interest in early American material culture was not limited only to academic activity. He believed it was not enough to preserve the tools of craft practices. He also felt that he must make an effort to continue the traditions in the community. Mercer had engaged in artistic activities since he was a boy, turning his hand to sketching, painting, and engraving. In the late nineteenth century, he observed that local potters were giving up their trade as factory-produced ceramics flooded markets. He started to experiment with ceramics, and found great success with designing and producing architectural tiles. In 1898, he founded the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works at Aldie. The tiles won numerous awards at expositions and exhibitions, and became architectural embellishments for some of the wealthiest clients on the east coast. The

¹⁴ Cleota Reed, *Henry Chapman Mercer and the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 6.

¹⁵ Dyke, *Chronology*, 26.

tiles were sold throughout the United States and abroad for domestic, commercial, ecclesiastical, and public buildings; Mercer's tiles continue to be produced and sold at the Tile Works today.¹⁶

Scholars consider the Tile Works to be one of the most important and influential arts and crafts potteries of the early twentieth century. Mercer himself recognized that the design and construction of his tiles matched the production principles of the movement. Reflecting on the founding of the Tile Works in 1914, he said "'After some further speculation over clay colors, the use and history of tiles, the substitution of handwork for machinery, and the encroachment of machinery upon art, the first important step was taken September 27, 1898.'"¹⁷ Images of the past permeated almost every aspect of Mercer's tiles. He looked to historical sources, especially the numerous etchings, engravings, and pottery he had acquired in Europe, for many of his tile designs.¹⁸ In fact, he explained that "'The name 'Moravian' was applied to the pottery because some of

¹⁶ At first Mercer thought that his pottery would be "'sort of an adjunct to the historical and educational work of this society [the Bucks County Historical Society].'" Dyke, *Chronology*, 14-30. Bucks County Historical Society, "Handbook," 48-49. Gerald W. Dieter and John Cummings, *The Bible in Tile* (Doylestown, Pennsylvania: Salem United Church of Christ, 1957), [7]. Thomas Poos, *Fonthill: The Home of Henry Chapman Mercer* ([s.l.]: American Distributing, 1985), 11.

¹⁷ Dyke, *Chronology*, 15-16.

¹⁸ Mercer collected approximately 7,000 prints throughout his life. He valued them as works of art, but also because he could use them to document printmaking history, learn about tools, and view architectural features of castles and old homes. Bucks County Historical Society, "Handbook," 31.

the first designs had been taken from stove plates” made in Pennsylvania German communities which he collected for the Mercer Museum.¹⁹ The tiles also depict craft methods and techniques and, therefore, become yet another way for Mercer to chronicle the history of his tool collection. He believed that “the design must be an aesthetic success in color, pattern . . . balance, etc. . . . But if the tiles could tell no story, inspire or teach nobody, and only serve to produce aesthetic thrills, I would have stopped making them long ago.”²⁰

The tiles not only show scenes of harmonious, preindustrial life, but they were created in an unmechanized manner. Mercer abhorred the use of machinery in making works of art such as the tiles, and limited the use of mechanical devices in the pottery. In 1929 he claimed that the Tile Works “has successfully maintained, against all modern conditions of mass production and financial gain, its principle that such tiles have been and should be works of art and that a work of art can never be made by machinery.”²¹ In 1900 his efforts earned him the honor of being elected a “craftsman” member of the

¹⁹ Dyke, *Chronology*, 15-16.

²⁰ Bucks County Historical Society, “Handbook,” 42.

²¹ Mercer did use machinery in the Tile Works for some of the more mundane aspects of production such as mixing clay, grinding pigments, and drying tiles. Mercer’s thoughts on the place of machines in modern life will be discussed later in this study. David B. Driscoll, “Henry Chapman Mercer: Technology, Aesthetics, and Arts and Crafts Ideals,” in *The Substance of Style: Perspectives on the Arts and Crafts Movement*, ed. Bert Denker (Winterthur, Delaware: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1996), 245-246.

Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston; this organization was the same group which named Mercer's former college professor, Charles Eliot Norton, as its first president.²² At the age of forty-four, Mercer had returned to his early interests in history and arts and crafts design as an accomplished collector and craftsman.

²² Dyke, *Chronology*, 16.

With a successful career as a historian and artisan, Mercer decided, at the age of fifty-one, to construct a house for himself in Doylestown. The means for a new residence came from the inheritance he received after the death of Aunt Lela in 1905. As he began to purchase land for the property in 1907, he had to select lots very carefully due to his intended building material, concrete. As early as 1904, Americans had embraced concrete as a viable building material. Publications such as *Cement Age* emerged onto the social scene, and declared concrete to be the ultimate modern building medium.²³ Mercer admired concrete for its fireproof qualities, especially after his uncle Timothy Lawrence's house was destroyed in the Great Fire of Boston in 1872, and his important collection of medieval armor perished.²⁴ Concrete also intrigued Mercer with its permanence, plasticity, relatively reasonable cost, and ability to act as a setting for his architectural tiles.²⁵ He meticulously planned the placement of his decorative tiles into the walls, floors, and ceilings of the house. The building became, therefore, a commercial showroom as much as it was a personal residence.

²³ Ibid., 18-19.

²⁴ Ibid., 3.

²⁵ Ibid., 20. Carl Schmidt, "The Eccentric Legacy of Dr. Henry Chapman Mercer." *Suburban Life* 4 (September 1969): 26.

Although he chose a modern material for his domicile, Mercer followed arts and crafts principles in the design and construction of the house. He adhered strictly to the arts and crafts doctrine that "form follows function" when planning the layout of the building. He said that he worked "entirely from the interior, the exterior not being considered until all the rooms had been imagined and sketched."²⁶ In all design matters, Mercer acknowledged that his house was "to be used first and looked at afterwards."²⁷ He had no formal training in architecture, but took it upon himself to be both architect and foreman of the site. As the designer, builder, and occupant, he epitomized the integration of form, creation, and function which was so important in arts and crafts architecture.²⁸

Mercer kept an extensive architectural notebook filled with sketches detailing every aspect of the interior. His drawings include plans for the arrangement of rooms and the location of furniture forms, and designs for architectural and structural details.²⁹ With a background as a ceramist and not a draftsman, Mercer did not use blueprints to

²⁶ Bucks County Historical Society, *The Mercer Mile: The Story of Dr. Henry Chapman Mercer and His Concrete Buildings* ([Doylestown, Pennsylvania: Bucks County Historical Society, 1972]), 13.

²⁷ *Evening Bulletin* (Philadelphia), 20 March 1930.

²⁸ Dyke, *Chronology*, 19.

²⁹ The crude pencil sketches in the notebook often provide floor plans indicating the locations of sofas, wardrobes, tables, and beds. Henry Chapman Mercer, "Architectural Notebook," Spruance Library, Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

create exterior and interior plans. Instead, as Mercer himself explained:

blocks of clay representing the rooms were piled on a table, set together, and molded into a general outline. After a good many changes in the profile of the owner, roof, etc., a plaster-of-Paris model was made to scale, and used till the building was completed.³⁰

Such fluidity in design perfectly suited the plasticity of concrete, and allowed Mercer to adhere to the precept that the form of a structure should take advantage of the nature of the building medium.

Not only did Mercer follow arts and crafts principles in the design of his house, but he held to the movement's rejection of machinery in his building techniques. Construction on the property lasted from 1908 to 1912. Mercer delighted in the fact that no mechanized production methods existed on the work site. When discussing the fabrication of the residence, Mercer recalled that:

All cement was mixed by hand and the material lifted in either iron wheelbarrows, or boxes with four handles to be carried by two men, or by a pulley fastened at the vertex of a very simple apparatus, namely a triangle about ten feet high, made of three wooden strips balanced with guy ropes so as to swing outward from the brink of the walls, or at a hand pull backward inside the ledge³¹. A horse was trained to pull forward a pulley rope on a counter block.

In fact, Mercer mentioned that the horse was the only nonhuman labor on the site. Lucy, as she was called, received a wage like any of the other eight to ten unskilled laborers

³⁰ Bucks County Historical Society, *The Mercer Mile*, 13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

who worked on the project daily.³² Mercer also did not conceal any of the construction techniques in the finished residence. He claimed that "'From the first to the last I tried to follow the precept of the architect Pugin: Decorate construction but never construct decoration...'³³

The design inspirations for the house follow the arts and crafts view that the best patterns come from historical, especially medieval, sources. Mercer claimed that the general form of the rooms came from historical writings and print images, coupled with his recollections of ancient European structures. In fact, he often directly copied architectural features from antique engravings and then reproduced them in the house.³⁴ Images from the past not only influenced the shape of the building, but historic objects inspired interior architectural elements. He built iron and cement balcony railings to resemble those of ancient Italy, and he adapted the design of interior doors from those in old Austrian buildings.³⁵

Throughout the house, Mercer incorporated antique materials. He used

³² Dyke, *Chronology*, 19. Bucks County Historical Society, *The Mercer Mile*, 13.

³³ Bucks County Historical Society, *The Mercer Mile*, 16.

³⁴ An engraving of an ancient apothecary's shop hangs in the Morning Room. In the image, a small alligator hangs from a hook in the ceiling. As one turns away from viewing the print in this room, one can see a small stuffed alligator hanging from a hook which Mercer placed in the Morning Room ceiling. Likewise, prints in the Columbus Room inspired the doorways and staircase in that space.

³⁵ Bucks County Historical Society, *Henry Chapman Mercer: Memorial Services* (Doylestown, Pennsylvania: Bucks County Historical Society, 1930), 38.

nineteenth-century doors and hinges from scrap heaps and wreckage yards around Doylestown in various rooms. The frames for his prints once were old mirror frames from the 1840s.³⁶ For the wall paneling in the Morning Room, Mercer used eighteenth- and nineteenth-century doors discarded in the Doylestown area.³⁷ He even preserved an eighteenth-century farmhouse already on the property by encasing it in concrete, and integrating it into the structure.³⁸

At the end of construction, Mercer had achieved a fusion of modern materials and historic design. The unique combination of romantic images and historic features, coupled with a contemporary building medium, led Mercer to christen the house a "castle for the New World."³⁹ The forty-two room structure included "seventeen bedrooms, workrooms, and living rooms, plus eight full bathrooms and two lavatories." With the addition of servants' quarters in 1913, the house grew by another thirteen rooms and two bathrooms.⁴⁰ He named the house Fonthill in honor of a Mercer family estate of

³⁶ Mercer incorporated European as well as American elements into the house. Some of the tiled capitals and bases of the concrete columns came from churches in Greece and France. Bucks County Historical Society, *The Mercer Mile*, 12, 16.

³⁷ Bucks County Historical Society, *Memorial Services*, 38.

³⁸ Reed, *Henry Chapman Mercer*, 19.

³⁹ Bucks County Historical Society, "Handbook," 35.

⁴⁰ Poos, *Fonthill*, 24.

the same name owned by R. M. T. Hunter in Essex County, Virginia.⁴¹

Fonthill, much like its owner, has eccentricities which defy easy cultural and social classification. The very idea of a modern castle is rife with contradictions. Mercer wanted an environment inspired by historic sources in plan, construction, and interior materials. He also desired many modern conveniences, however. The house boasted some of the most state-of-the-art mechanized contrivances of the day, including electric lighting, modern plumbing fixtures, and a central heating system.⁴² To install such devices, Mercer relied upon skilled contractors, thereby bending his rule of only using unskilled labor to fashion the house.⁴³

After four years of construction and a cost of approximately \$31,000, Mercer moved into Fonthill in 1912. The house was a very personal project in its conception, creation, and occupation. Mercer lived in the building as a bachelor until his death in 1930.⁴⁴ Although a number of hired hands assisted with cooking, cleaning, maintenance, and driving duties, only two servants definitely resided in the house during Mercer's lifetime. One of these attendants was Frank Swain, who had acted as Mercer's

⁴¹ Mercer had visited the house during his wagon tour of Virginia. He also thought that the name Fonthill "seemed very appropriate on account of the fine spring rising . . . on a hilltop" on the property. Bucks County Historical Society, *Memorial Services*, 32.

⁴² Bucks County Historical Society, "Handbook," 35.

⁴³ Dyke, *Chronology*, 19.

⁴⁴ Poos, *Fonthill*, 17.

archaeological assistant and later became manager of the Tile Works. The other servant was Laura Long, Mercer's housekeeper from his previous residence. Frank and Laura married in 1925, and Mercer paid for their six-month European honeymoon as a wedding present.⁴⁵ For the most part, therefore, Fonthill was a building made by Mercer and for Mercer. The house, therefore, could be a statement of Mercer's personality, as much as it might be an expression of historical and modern design. As Thomas Poos wrote:

Fonthill is a highly personal, three-dimensional testament to one man's inventiveness and artistic standards, to his courage in carrying out his convictions, and to his determination to build a house which would, in his own words, 'Combine the poetry of the past with the convenience of the present.'⁴⁶

Mercer died at Fonthill on March 9, 1930 from Bright's disease and myocarditis.⁴⁷ In his will, Mercer decreed that the property be left in trust to the Bucks County Historical Society as a museum for the study of tiles and prints. He also stipulated that Frank and Laura Swain were to use Fonthill as their private residence until their deaths. After Frank Swain died in 1954, Laura Swain continued to occupy and care for the property until her death in 1975.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Dyke, *Chronology*, 17-28.

⁴⁶ Poos, *Fonthill*, 53.

⁴⁷ Dyke, *Chronology*, 30. Bright's Disease is a kidney disorder, and myocarditis probably refers to a disorder of the myocardium or the muscle of the heart. *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1995 ed., s.v. "Bright's disease." *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1995 ed., s.v. "myocarditis."

⁴⁸ Dyke, *Chronology*, 31.

The Bucks County Historical Society opened Fonthill to the general public as a museum in 1975. Today, the staff interprets Mercer's life and work through guided tours of the property. Guests marvel at the concrete architecture and colorful tile installations. Visitors often view the furniture, most of which remains from Mercer's residency, as cheap, crude pieces which Mercer himself disdained; people also tend to ignore the furnishings altogether. An investigation of the forms and refinements of the furniture of Fonthill, however, reveals that these objects are powerful statements not only of crucial social movements in the early twentieth century, but of Mercer's personal and aesthetic sensibilities.

For the purposes of this study, the author investigated nearly one hundred pieces of furniture in nine of the rooms currently furnished at Fonthill.⁴⁹ Included in the survey were the Library, Saloon, Morning Room, Study, Columbus Room, and the Dormer, East, Terrace, and Yellow Bedrooms.⁵⁰ The author prepared catalogue worksheets for each object, focusing on the form, style, construction, decoration, treatment of the artifact, and any unusual markings. Further information about the objects came from the 1930 probate inventory of the property, and Mercer's personal household inventory maintained during his residency.

⁴⁹ When available, the Fonthill accession number appears in parentheses after the description of the object. All locations are current as of October 1997.

⁵⁰ Mercer named the rooms at Fonthill, and often had the title of each space spelled out in tile above its doorway.

Mercer took advantage of the plasticity of his concrete architecture to fashion concrete furniture in many of the rooms. These objects include forms made entirely of concrete, and built-in to the supporting walls. Often the concrete furniture consists of bookcases and shelves (Figure 1). The bookcases sometimes occur as individual units with four or five plain concrete shelves. They would have been painted, with traces of blue, green, red, orange, and yellow colors visible on interior and exterior surfaces. At other times, however, Mercer created large banks of bookcases which cover great areas of the wall surface. In all of these objects, the floor of the room forms the bottom of the last shelf. To prevent any damage to his books that might occur from resting on the bare concrete floor, Mercer often includes a buffer. Instead of sitting directly on the floor, the books sit on large pieces of slate supported by wood blocks. One notable exception to the built-in concrete bookcases appears in the Saloon, where Mercer created a bookcase by stacking four, free-standing, concrete shelves. Built-in concrete tables also occupy most of the rooms. The tables appear often in bedrooms, so they may have served as desks and night tables as well. Sometimes the tables include lower shelves for additional storage. To further enhance such pieces, Mercer incorporated tiles into some of the table tops. Polychromatic square tiles cover these surfaces, with borders of colored cylindrical tiles defining the outer edges.

While Mercer crafted some of the built-in furnishings at Fonthill entirely from concrete, he made other built-in forms from mixed media. In the bedrooms, he often fashioned built-in wardrobes which have backs and sides made of concrete. To enclose

the pieces, however, Mercer used wooden, paneled doors set into the concrete frames. The doors could have been recycled from other structures; after all, Mercer did incorporate old doors into many areas of the house. Many of the doors, however, merely appear to be paneled. On these falsely-paneled pieces, the rails and stiles are nailed on top of a single board in a pattern which gives the appearance of paneling. Small moldings nailed along the edges of the panels give the viewer the illusion of depth, and enhance the effect of the simulated paneling. All of the paneled doors, regardless of construction techniques, are painted in a polychromatic pattern. Often the door itself is a ground color, with contrasting hues for the panels and different accent shades for the moldings.

Mercer's experiments with mixing concrete and wooden elements appear even more forcefully in concrete case pieces filled with wooden elements. In both the Columbus Room and the East Bedroom, Mercer molded the frames for a chest of drawers from concrete, leaving open spaces for inserting wooden drawers (Figure 2). Each drawer consists of wooden boards butted and nailed together, with molded edges nailed to the drawer fronts. The paint which covered the concrete cases has faded, but one can see traces of paint remaining on the drawer fronts and moldings.

Mercer may have been following arts and crafts precedents in fashioning his built-in concrete furniture. By using concrete's malleable qualities in creating the objects, Mercer adhered to arts and crafts beliefs that a craftsman must recognize and utilize the inherent properties of building materials. Artisans such as Gustav Stickley also

advocated built-in furnishings as important interior features in published house plans of the period. He planned built-in cupboards, sideboards, cabinets, window seats, box couches, and bookcases in nearly all of his Craftsman homes.⁵¹ Stickley valued such furniture for its beauty, practicality, and convenience. He believed that built-ins could be used in a way that:

not only gives to them the kind of beauty and interest which is theirs by right, but makes them of practical value in the life of the household, as such furnishings mean great convenience, economy of space, and the doing away with many pieces of furniture which might otherwise be really needed but which would give⁵² the appearance of crowding, so disturbing to the restfulness of the room.

Mercer's built-in concrete furniture, with its delicate decoration, simple lines and clearly-expressed functionality, certainly reflects Stickley's views.⁵³

Built-in furniture, especially pieces composed of mixed media, also was a means of personal expression for Mercer. These objects allowed him to experiment with

⁵¹ Gustav Stickley, "Some Built-In Furnishings From Our Own Bungalows and A Simple Model or Two for Metal Workers," *The Craftsman* 15 (November 108): 232-235.

⁵² Gustav Stickley, *Craftsman Furniture* (New York: The Craftsman Publishing Company, 1909), 115.

⁵³ As a side note, Stickley and Mercer share another common bond besides their support of built-in furniture. Throughout his work, Mercer declared his personal creed of *Plus Ultra*, which is Latin for "More Beyond." Stickley, in all of his work, stated his own creed of "Als ik Kan," which he described as "an ancient Flemish motto . . . used by Van Eyk on his paintings;" translated, the phrase means "'As I can' or 'the best that I, according to my ability and convictions, can do.'" Poos, *Fonthill*, 17. Gustav Stickley, *Chips from the Craftsman Workshops* (New York: The Craftsman Publishing Company, [c.1907]), back cover.

different forms, colors, and materials in a house which itself was as much a study in innovation as it was a residence. One early twentieth-century visitor to Fonthill described the house as a "studio-library-workshop" for Mercer's ideas.⁵⁴ Even today, scholars classify Fonthill as "a shout of discovery, a celebration of one man's insatiable curiosity," and a "combination of instinct, improvisation, and experimentation."⁵⁵ Exploration was the only constant in Mercer's career as an "archaeologist, historian, writer, collector, scholar, museum founder, folklorist, architect, businessman, and artist."⁵⁶

Mercer might have followed arts and crafts conventions in choosing other types of furniture for Fonthill. Many of the artifacts are very simple and utilitarian in form and construction. There are small wooden cupboards in almost all of the bedrooms (Figure 3). These cupboards have one or two compartments covered by paneled doors. Some of the doors have conventional paneling, while others have the false paneling used in the built-in furniture. The cupboards were painted with the frame, doors, and nailed moldings picked out in contrasting colors. The only exception to this description is the cupboard in the Dormer Bedroom (F 11.35), which shows no signs of having been painted.

⁵⁴ Horace Mann, "Scrapbook," Spruance Library, Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

⁵⁵ Don Wilcox, "American Originals: Henry Chapman Mercer and Fonthill." *American Craft* 43 (December 1983/January 1984): 24, 26.

⁵⁶ Driscoll. "Henry Chapman Mercer," 244.

The numerous wooden bookcases in the Study, Library, and Saloon are the epitome of simplicity in design and fabrication (Figure 4). Each shelf consists of four wooden boards butted and nailed together to form an open crate. Three or four of these crates, stacked on top of each other, form plain bookcases. Sometimes Mercer uses vast quantities of these crates to form elaborate bookcases covering large areas of the wall. He also often adds wooden planks braced to these banks of bookcases to create makeshift desks (Figure 5). Such constructs were so simple and inexpensive that they do not appear in the 1930 probate inventory. Mercer showed some interest in refining these crates, however, by nailing decorative moldings to the outer edges. The whole crate is painted, mostly with green paint for the shelf itself, and red and gold accents on the moldings. Often recycled materials provided the wood for the bookcases. The crates in the Study, for example, all have hand holds on the sides along the bottom and back edges which indicate some previous purpose.

Even the large wooden furnishings in the house exhibit a distinct plainness and economy of materials and construction. Some of these objects, especially chests of drawers, fit specific areas of the house. The pieces conform into alcoves and wall spaces with such precision that Mercer must have intended for them to remain in these places. Wooden chests of drawers, with either metal pulls or wooden handles, exist in the Yellow Bedroom, the Morning Room, and the Dormer Bedroom. These objects have an extensive number of drawers arranged in an irregular fashion. Each piece shares similar construction techniques as well, with drawers simply butted and nailed together. Parts of

the drawers still bear pencil marks saying "Sides," "Backs," and "Fronts." The frame, drawer fronts, and applied moldings often are painted in contrasting colors.

Mercer adheres to the arts and crafts emphasis on simple and utilitarian objects through these wooden furnishings. Period craftsman, such as Stickley, believed furniture should be simple, durable, comfortable, and appropriate to the owner's environment and lifestyle. Stickley believed that furnishings should exhibit a "primitive structural idea: that is, the form that would naturally suggest itself to the workman, were he called upon to express frankly and in proper materials, the bare essential qualities of a bed, chair, table."⁵⁷ Moreover, he insisted that "provisions for practical meets [were] the requisite of design."⁵⁸ The form and construction of the wooden furniture made for Fonthill certainly displays these characteristics.

While Mercer's furnishings may seem to be products of arts and crafts ideals, they also reflect his unique interpretation of the movement's tenets. The beds at Fonthill best express his personal evaluation and implementation of popular design reforms. All of the beds at Fonthill have metal frames and spring mattress supports (Figure 6). The beds have clean, simple lines with plain, rectangular posts along the low headboards and footboards. Painted in various shades, from green to yellow-green to a deep blue-green, the frames also have painted gold accents at the top of the main posts. The name

⁵⁷ Gustav Stickley, *What is Wrought in the Craftsman Workshops* (New York: The Craftsman Publishing Company, 1904), 18.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

“McMahen” appears on a paper label on one of the mattresses (on bed F 41.15), and is stamped into the metal frame of another bed as well (F 41.78). William H. McMahan was a bed and mattress maker operating in Philadelphia in the early part of the twentieth century.⁵⁹ Mercer had extensive business and scholarly contacts in the city, so it is not surprising that he could have purchased the objects there.

The presence of these mass-produced, industrial forms might seem startling in the home of the one of the leaders of the arts and crafts movement. Metal beds and spring mattress supports enjoyed a great deal of popularity during this time period, however. Companies across the country produced metal bed frames since the mid nineteenth century. Some of the designs for metal beds and accessories could be quite elaborate. The main attraction for the American public was not their beauty, however, but their functionality. Objects which met a family’s needs for “simplicity, economy, and ‘hygiene’ (cleanliness achieved through ease of maintenance)” were crucial components in household planning and management manuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶⁰ In their 1883 catalogue, the Hartford Woven Wire Mattress Company of Holyoke, Massachusetts extolled the virtues of their product in terms of its health and hygienic benefits. The company quoted doctors from around the country who said that wire mattress were better because they conformed to the shape of a person’s

⁵⁹ *Boyd’s Philadelphia Business Directory* (Philadelphia: C. E. Howe Company, 1918), 1380.

⁶⁰ Danforth Museum of Art, *Threshold of Modern Design*, 20.

body, and allowed air to circulate while avoiding the possibility of becoming infected with “bodily impurities” and vermin.⁶¹

Ostermoor and Company of New York focused on the sanitary nature of metal bedsteads and mattresses in their catalogue, published in the first decade of the twentieth century. The company, however, also stressed the value of the designs of the beds. Besides being healthier, Ostermoor said that metal beds had “artistic beauty and simplicity . . . utility, [a] clean, cheerful appearance, and great durability” which made them popular in the “palaces of the rich and the most modest of homes.”⁶² Mercer himself seems to have been most interested in the utility and plain designs of metal beds. He chose a very simple style for the beds at Fonthill, and the 1930 inventory only valued each bed between five and twenty dollars.⁶³

As with the construction of the house, Mercer may have been more concerned with the fact that form followed function, than with the idea that the form was expressed and constructed with modern materials and machinery. After all, he had no qualms about the use of machinery in creating purely functional objects. In 1920 he wrote, “For a long

⁶¹ Hartford Woven Wire Mattress Company, *Illustrated Catalogue and Price List* (Holyoke, Massachusetts: The Company, 1883), 3-5, 110.

⁶² Ostermoor and Company, *Metal Bedsteads and High Grade Springs* (New York: The Company, [190-]), 1.

⁶³ “Probate inventory for Fonthill, 1930” TMs [photocopy], Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

time I have thought that the machine has more or less justly superseded all domestic arts and crafts which do not depend upon art for their reasonable existence."⁶⁴ He reiterated this idea in 1928 by saying "'machines can't make art. It can make automobiles and radios and telephones, but it can't create art. Art needs the touch of a human hand."⁶⁵ Mercer had his own unique view of arts and crafts principles. His individual implementation of such practices, whether through the use of simple, metal beds or through building a castle in concrete, is entirely appropriate for a house which was a "highly personal blend of romanticism and ingenuity, an expression on the grandest scale of the individual tastes, beliefs, and intriguing visions of Henry Chapman Mercer."⁶⁶

Personal interests might also explain Mercer's choice of tables, chests, desks, and clocks for Fonthill. Many of the tables in the house are of Pennsylvania German origin (Figure 7). Mercer owned a significant number of tables in the Morning Room, Saloon, Library, and Study identified in the 1930 inventory as Pennsylvania German tavern or stretcher tables.⁶⁷ Most of the table tops are attached through pegs placed through arms on either side of the base. Very often such removable tops occur in Pennsylvania German kitchen tables to facilitate the replacement of surfaces which became worn through

64 Driscoll, "Henry Chapman Mercer," 248.

65 Ibid., 253.

66 Poos, *Fonthill*, 53.

67 "Probate inventory, 1930."

extensive culinary preparations. The bases of the tables, which can be quite long or about the size of a stool seat, mostly are rectangular and house one, two, or three drawers. The single drawers can run the length of the base, while the double drawers can be of equal or unequal size. The three-drawer table (F 11.263) has a large central drawer with two equally-sized smaller drawers flanking it. The only notable exception to this group is the large dining table in the Saloon (F 11.242) which has no drawers.

While some tables have metal bail handles, most of the pieces boast simple, rectangular, wooden drawer pulls pegged through the drawer fronts. The bottom edge of the bases sometimes have rounded moldings, or carved scalloped designs which form a skirt. The tables have turned legs, often with heavy vase-and-ring patterns. The tables also have heavy stretchers near the turned feet. These Pennsylvania German tables are painted, with the base and stretchers usually covered in a single ground color and the legs picked out in another hue. In the most common color combination, the base and stretchers are red, while the legs are green with gold or green accents. Sometimes, however, the drawer fronts also have colors in contrast to the base.

Besides the Pennsylvania German examples described above, Mercer had several other types of tables. In the Morning Room stands the only tea table found in the survey (F 11.50). The table has an octagonal top, and the shaft is quite thick. The chunky, curved legs extend out into enormous slipper feet. Traces of green paint, which seem to be as worn as the rest of the object, cover the table. The heavy wear, massive proportions, and overall crude nature of the object might indicate that it was an outdoor

table produced by a country craftsman. Another unusual table form exists in the Terrace Bedroom. In the bedroom is a large gateleg table with a central drawer and large leaves (F 11.71).⁶⁸ A combination of carpentry, nails, and screwed metal straps hold the artifact together. The table has red paint overall, with gold and green accents on the turned legs.

In the Terrace Bedroom, the Saloon, and the Morning Room is the last type of table found at Fonthill. In each room stands an unpainted breakfast table with large tops and leaves. For at least one of these tables (F 11.249), the top does not seem to be original to the piece. Glue blocks reinforce all of the narrow rectangular frames. Only one table (F 11.61) has a small central drawer, but all of the objects have straight, tapered legs and natural wood finishes. The 1930 inventory stated that these tables were all antiques, with values between thirty and one hundred dollars.⁶⁹

Mercer's preference for Pennsylvania German and antique artifacts appears in other furniture in the house. He acquired wooden chests, either with a Pennsylvania German provenance or modeled after such forms, which he then painted in contrasting red and green colors (Figure 8). A similar palette adorns the tall slant-front desk in the Saloon (F 11.239), described in the 1930 inventory as an old school master's desk. The inventory also listed the unpainted slant-front desk in the Saloon (F 11.240) as an

⁶⁸ The 1930 probate inventory indicated that this piece was in the Saloon at Mercer's death. Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

antique.⁷⁰ The unpainted chest of drawers in the Terrace Bedroom (F 11.48) appears to have been at least part of a historic object: the artifact probably was once the top half of a high chest (Figure 9).

Mercer's interest in Pennsylvania German objects extends to the only tall clock found in this study (F 40.05). The face of the clock, located in the Library, bears the signature "Jacob Godshalk Phila." Jacob Godschalk, a native of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, was a notable pre-Revolutionary clock maker. He moved to Philadelphia in the late 1760s, where city tax lists from 1769 place him at Mulberry Ward, East Part. He dropped the German *sch* from his name when he arrived in the city. Described as a clock maker in the 1774 tax list, he later appears as a watchmaker in 1780. He died shortly after 1781, which dates this clock to 1769-1781.⁷¹ As with every other piece in the house, Pennsylvania German or otherwise, Mercer imposed his own color scheme on the object. He painted the case light green, while the central panel and top of the case are a salmon color, and gold accents highlight the edges of the case.

While often dismissed for their simple forms, these Pennsylvania German and antique pieces would have had special significance for Mercer. He probably acquired old furniture during his collecting excursions for the Mercer Museum. Such trips brought him into contact with old, heavily worn pieces which their owners considered to be

70 Ibid.

71 George Eckhardt, *Pennsylvania Clocks and Clockmakers* (New York: Devin-Adair Company, 1955), 212.

disposable debris. Mercer, therefore, might have felt the same need to save this furniture that he did to salvage discarded tools. He also might have used bits and pieces of furnishings, such as the top of the high chest, as a way not only to preserve, but to recycle materials. Preservation and recycling certainly were part of Mercer's *modus operandi* at Fonthill, as evidenced by his use of old objects as interior architectural elements and the unique integration of the eighteenth-century farmhouse.

The Pennsylvania German pieces were particularly meaningful to Mercer. As anti-German sentiment swept the country during World War I, Mercer might have used these objects as symbols of his pro-German feelings. After all, his sister had married a Bavarian, and he had many friends in Germany.⁷² Mercer kept articles which chronicled the events of the war, and openly voiced his outrage against the defamation of Germans.⁷³ He wrote to Edward Prizer in 1923 that "To me the war has been a terrible nightmare, delirium tremens all around, ourselves drunker than the rest but with much less reason. Family ties smashed, friendships broken, hearts snapped without reasonable excuse."⁷⁴

As an anthropologist, Pennsylvania German objects fascinated Mercer. He first became interested in the folkways of the Pennsylvania Germans while searching the

⁷² Bucks County Historical Society, "Handbook," 62.

⁷³ Dyke, *Chronology*, 25.

⁷⁴ Bucks County Historical Society, "Handbook," 63.

Bucks County countryside for tools. He produced numerous publications on the stove plates and fraktur of these communities. In fact, he was the first connoisseur to label the illuminated writing of the region with the term "fraktur." "Captivated by the gaily decorated and often whimsical designs of the fraktur and pottery, he was dismayed to realize that both crafts had almost completely disappeared."⁷⁵ Mercer may have wanted Pennsylvania German pieces in his home as visual evidence of the folkways which inspired and intrigued him, and as part of his efforts to keep such traditions alive.

Of all of the ordinary and extraordinary furniture found at Fonthill, the objects which appear most frequently and abundantly are Windsor chairs. The greatest number of these chairs are square-back Windsor side chairs (Figure 10). The chairs share some common characteristics. Mercer painted all of them in a polychromatic paint scheme, with various structural elements distinguished in dual, contrasting colors. The chairs have yellow, green, blue, black, and red paint, with these colors also used to accent the turnings. The heavy use of bamboo work on the main stiles, stretchers, and legs is another common feature. The crest rails of the chairs show marked differences, however (Figure 11). Some of the objects have single-rod crest rails. Other chairs have double-rod crest rails, with some displaying small rectangular plaques in the center of the gap between the rails. The tablets are painted in solid colors which match one of the two hues on the chair. Some of the side chairs are tablet-top Windsors, with the crest rails

⁷⁵ Helen H. Gemmill, "Original, Alone, and Unique: Henry Chapman Mercer," *Philadelphia Antiques Show Magazine*, 1997, 35-36.

often a solid color in keeping with the dual-hued scheme of the object. One of these chairs in the Study (F 11.40), however, does have a fairly crude scene of a house set within a landscape painted on the crest rail. The 1930 inventory listed most of these Windsor side chairs as antiques, with values around twenty dollars.⁷⁶ Despite their historic background, Mercer experimented with the objects through paint, and through the use of metal collars and straps to strengthen joints and extend the artifacts' height.

The armchairs in Fonthill also are predominantly historic Windsor pieces. The overwhelming majority of the armchairs are sack-back Windsors with oval and saddle seats, plain backs and stretchers, and turned legs and arm posts (Figure 12). The armchairs normally have a great deal of heft to them, and are painted in a two-toned pattern. Sometimes the backs and seats are in a contrasting color to the other elements of the chair; yellow and red, yellow and green, red and black, and red and green are popular color combinations. As with almost all of the furniture at Fonthill, gold paint often accents the turnings on the legs. Metal collars screwed in to the legs and feet reinforce weak areas on most of the chairs. The 1930 inventory stated that while most of the Windsor armchairs were antique, they did not have substantial values. In some cases, moreover, the inventory noted that the Windsor chairs were reproductions.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ "Probate inventory, 1930."

⁷⁷ Ibid. To prove that the workmen did an admirable job of protecting the building from drafts, Mercer explained that in Fonthill "blackened shoes in dark closets never mildew, cigars dry up in their boxes, Windsor chairs rattle loose." Bucks County Historical Society, *The Mercer Mile*, 12.

In terms of large seating forms, Mercer also predominantly chose historic Windsor pieces for the house. Three painted Windsor settees appear in the Columbus Room, the Morning Room, and the Saloon (Figure 13). Each settee has a uniform ground color, either red, green, or black. The crest rails are cut in a pattern of alternating scrolled and flat edges. The face of the crest rails have painted polychromatic designs of fruit and foliage. Each settee has a distinctive back, and thin, slightly-curving arms ending in volutes of varying sizes. On each piece, gold painted lines accent the shape of the seats and the backs, stretchers, and legs. Mercer felt free to alter the settees to meet the needs of the house. A side passage off of the Saloon has a small step leading down to an open area containing a Windsor settee. To insure that the settee would be level on such an uneven floor surface, Mercer cut the front and back left legs to fit over the offending step. The 1930 inventory listed all of these pieces as antique painted benches and Windsor settees, with values between thirty-five and 125 dollars.⁷⁸

While all of the Windsor settees were antique according to the 1930 inventory, all of the Windsor chairs were not. The inventory listed a few reproduction chairs scattered throughout the house. The presence of reproduction furniture creates an interesting comparison in the Morning Room. In this room are two identical high-back Windsor armchairs (F 11.51 and F 11.52), with yoke-shaped crest rails terminating in graceful volutes. The chairs both have semi-circular seats, and turned stretchers, legs, and arm

78 "Probate inventory, 1930."

posts. On the underside of chair F 11.51 are two inscriptions: one is a handwritten caption which reads "Manufactured at Doylestown Pa/His Holbain Shops/By Oliver J. Holbain/Cabinetmaker/in Person/#2 1923." The other caption appears to have been burned into the wood, and provides a clearer description of the meaning of these twin chairs. In delicate script, the second inscription says "Copy from original in my possession/by Oliver Holbain Doylestown 1923/Bought for \$25. 1923. HC Mercer." Not only did Mercer collect antique Windsor chairs, he purchased reproductions of Windsor objects and admired their forms so much that he had duplicates made of at least one of these artifacts.

Mercer shied away from the use of upholstered furniture at Fonthill. In fact, only two upholstered sofas appeared in this study (Figure 14). These objects truly are the crude furnishings in the house. The sofa (F 50.05) in the Study seems to be a stage prop rather than a comfortable piece of seating furniture. The back consists of thin wooden boards with little to no stuffing. The rest of the piece is nailed together haphazardly, or screwed together with heavy metal brackets. The whole object, including the front feet, is covered with red leather nailed to the frame or fastened with large metal tacks. The leather is not fitted to the shape of the frame, but rather is folded carelessly to fit the scrolled arms and curved feet.

The sofa (F 50.49) in the Library is not a very costly or carefully-made piece. The

1930 inventory described it as a "leatherette sofa," valued at five dollars.⁷⁹ The Library sofa does have more padding in the back, but the stuffing material consists of old newspapers. The fabric upholstery, painted to look like leather, is tacked randomly along the surface of the piece to form many folds and creases. While not equal in monetary value to the historic Windsor pieces, Mercer does treat these objects the same as other artifacts at Fonthill. The sofa in the Library rests against a section of the paneled wall containing a small niche. So the sofa would fit into this alcove evenly. Mercer cut a notch in the back of the piece to correspond with the uneven texture of the wall.

The seating furniture of Fonthill reflects prevailing social conventions as well as Mercer's personal predilections. By predominantly choosing antique Windsor pieces, he expressed his interest in recreating the past in his modern interiors. His need to fashion historical spaces might explain the lack of upholstered furniture in the house. After all, upholstered furniture was one of the physical manifestations of the triumph of modern civilization according to the Victorian mind set. Upholstery gained the praise of Victorians for being "'rich' in appearance, 'elaborated,' 'well-finished,' 'elegant,' and 'ornamental.'" Upholstered pieces had enormous value "for their detail, for their 'softened' or 'softening' effect, and finally for their contribution to the 'refinement' of a room."⁸⁰ All of these concepts represented the advancements of the age, a time when

⁷⁹ The sofa in the Library, therefore, is the poor cousin of the one in the Study, which had a value of seven dollars and fifty cents. Ibid.

⁸⁰ Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: People, Parlors, and Upholstery 1850-1930* (New York: Strong Museum, 1988), 147.

man had conquered the most complicated aspects of nature and used them to improve society. In many ways, Fonthill was a reaction against such views. Mercer built the structure based on simple design sources from the past, and he sought to recreate historic vistas. For him, antique furniture which extolled the accomplishments of past craftsmanship became more important than upholstered furniture meant to glorify the gains of the present.

Mercer was not alone in wanting to return to a simpler, preindustrial way of life represented by his Windsor furniture. While industrialization had distanced workers from their products, it also brought people closer together. The modern mingling of different ethnic and social groups in an increasingly smaller world created anxiety in the hearts of many nineteenth-century Americans. When faced with such cultural confusion brought on by the advent of new social and economic systems, western societies tend to react in certain ways. Kenneth Ames explained the key components of such western responses:

Central elements of the response to modernism are an orientation toward either preindustrial times or nonindustrial alternatives in the present, an emphasis on handicraft, an antiurban bias . . . and an inclination to stress simple rather than complex social structures, homogenous, cooperative folk rather than diverse, competitive people.⁸¹

Nineteenth-century Americans expressed these ideas through a renewed interest in the colonial past. A revival of colonial material culture, whether architecture, furniture, or

⁸¹ Kenneth L. Ames, "Introduction," in *The Colonial Revival in America*, ed. Alan Axelrod (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1985), 11.

other decorative arts objects, became a popular fashion.

A vogue for Windsor chairs played an important part of the colonial revival in America. Entrepreneurs such as Wallace Nutting extolled the virtues of historic furniture, especially Windsor chairs, in his company's catalogues from the early part of the twentieth century. In his *American Windsors* catalogue, Nutting stated:

A Windsor chair, even to a person who does not know it by name, is perhaps more suggestive of pleasant reflections than any other article of furniture . . . The WINDSOR is comfortable . . . Though its lines are so simple, it is at its best very dignified, attractive, and decorative . . .⁸²

Nutting described the current craze for acquiring such desirable antique Windsors in the same publication:

It has become dangerous to the peace of mind of a country estate owner or that of a farmer's wife to leave a good WINDSOR on the porch facing the street. A fine limousine will stop for such bait, which is more deadly than the catchiest fly to a trout.⁸³

He went on to delineate the virtues of the ideal Windsor chair, as well as the most appropriate paint choices for Windsors, saying "A brightly shining WINDSOR is offensive. The early finish was often the old Indian red . . . Red paint is also a popular old finish . . . Dark green seems to have been the most popular color and most satisfactory."⁸⁴

⁸² Wallace Nutting, *American Windsors* (Southampton, New York: Cracker Barrel Press, 1917), 5.

⁸³ Ibid., 129.

⁸⁴ Nutting also recommended using black, yellow, and drab finishes. Under no circumstances, however, should a Windsor be white. Nutting declared that "Not a good word can be said for it. It is bad taste through and through." Ibid., 33, 41.

The use of Windsor chairs as the predominant seating form in the house seems to fit with popular interest in historic furnishings as expressed by Nutting and other colonial revival advocates.

Mercer was aware of the growing interest in American colonial furniture so prevalent in this period. Among the 6,000 volumes in his library, he owned a copy of Nutting's *American Windsors*. Works on the subject of antique American furniture in his library included Luke Vincent Lockwood's *Colonial Furniture in America*, Mary H. Northend's *American Homes and Their Furnishings*, Irving Whittall Lyon's *Colonial Furniture of New England*, and Russell Sturgis' *Furniture of Our Forefathers*.⁸⁵ Northend declared that such objects were a source of inspiration and intrigue for all lovers of the quaint and artistic, two attributes which Mercer definitely appreciated in his surroundings. All of these volumes were published in the early part of the twentieth century when Mercer was selecting the furniture for Fonthill, and might have influenced his decision to fill the house with historic American furnishings.⁸⁶

85 Mercer owned books on such various subjects as art, the history of technology, architecture, botany, music, folklore, ghost stories, literature, history, poetry, religion, travel, shipwrecks, and, of course, archaeology. He felt free to comment on authors' writings by making copious notes in the margins of his books. Bucks County Historical Society, "Handbook," 63.

86 Northend also said in her book that the "soft glow of the candle affords an artistic touch that nothing else can give," again linking colonial objects and life ways to one of Mercer's primary interests. Mary H. Northend, *Colonial Homes and Their Furnishings* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1912), 92, 159.

Mercer's personality probably led to the prevalence of so much historic furniture more than public opinion on the appropriateness and value of colonial objects. Mercer detested most aspects of modern society. In 1918, he wrote that "I am convinced that, with the exception of architecture and perhaps a few paintings, art at present is almost dead. My only hope is to educate children and wait two or three generations."⁸⁷ He particularly despised modern movements in painting as expressed in another letter:

The Cubists or Futurists appear to have made a deliberate and savage onslaught upon beauty which all artists back to primitive man can have sought for about three thousand years. They worship ugliness and I hope no more of them will come to see me and show me their infernal productions.⁸⁸

Reflecting on the increasing amount of motor car traffic, Mercer said in 1921 that "I don't want to be unsympathetic and there are many places where the motor car can go and ought to go but are there not some spots so secluded, so pervaded with memories that it would seem that there we might say 'thus far and no farther.'"⁸⁹ Even contemporary women's fashions drew his ire. In 1924 he wrote to a friend who was sending some visitors to see Mercer at Fonthill:

I haven't been to Philadelphia for five years and don't want to go as they appear to be tearing everything to pieces in true American fashion. If the lady from Sewickey ever comes this way I will do my best to please her with the ulterior motive of learning about you for if, like the majority of

⁸⁷ Bucks County Historical Society, "Handbook," 64.

⁸⁸ Reed, *Henry Chapman Mercer*, 22.

⁸⁹ Bucks County Historical Society, "Handbook," 65.

her sex today, she has bobbed her hair and wears one of those bushel basket ear crushing hats or centipede head buttons.⁹⁰ I fear I am too much of a Victorian to warm up to the old gallant level.

Creating an atmosphere of the past was one way for Mercer to retreat from the modern world which he so disliked. Indeed, "he seemed to burrow deeper into the past, while the spirit of the times--the 1920s-- was one of seeking all that was new and modern."⁹¹ He retreated into his own world so well that in the 1920s someone sent him a letter addressed to "Henry Chapman Mercer or His Estate."⁹²

Windsor chairs were just one part of Mercer's attempt to escape from contemporary society through evoking images of the past. He used old boards with cracks and holes as forms while building Fonthill, to purposefully age the concrete and give it a "random, uneven texture."⁹³ He took architectural elements and objects featured in historic prints, and created the exact same environments in the house. One period account of Mercer's daily activities in Fonthill described how he used candles in a house with electric lighting. He would eat his supper "by the light of a student lamp," and when retreating to bed he would take a "brass frying-pan candlestick . . . would light

⁹⁰ Ibid. According to Joseph Sandford, Mercer "hated the Philistines who menaced his world" such as the lady in question. "He wanted to be left alone to 'Live pleasant'--a phrase he attributed to Burke." Sandford, *Henry Chapman Mercer*. 4.

⁹¹ Reed, *Henry Chapman Mercer*, xxii.

⁹² Schmidt, "Eccentric Legacy," 27.

⁹³ Poos, *Fonthill*, 36.

the candle, bid . . . good night, and mount the stair, his footsteps dying away in the darkness."⁹⁴

Through his architecture, actions, and objects, such as Windsor chairs, Mercer succeeded in creating a world at Fonthill which fit his personal predisposition to live in the past. For the environment to provide the comfort he craved, the objects did not have to be historically accurate as much as they needed evoke images of the past. Indeed, for most advocates of historical revivals, "The requirement to possess a past as [they] need it is often more pressing than any motive of historical accuracy."⁹⁵ Using reproduction objects, therefore, would be an appropriate expression of the past for Mercer. "As he aged, Mercer turned inward. In many ways, he felt alienated from the twentieth century. Fonthill was his solace, his balance."⁹⁶ Antique Windsor chairs, and objects made in their likeness, helped Mercer to maintain his equilibrium by providing a window into the past.

The markings on the Windsor furniture at Fonthill indicate another reason why Mercer might have found these forms to be important. In some cases, the undersides of the Windsor armchairs have a yellow painted inventory number indicating that, at one time, the object was part of the Mercer Museum collection. One armchair in particular

⁹⁴ Sandford, *Henry Chapman Mercer*, 6.

⁹⁵ Historic forms, whether authentic or not, have "no fixed symbolic content," but are instead "a . . . bottomless pool of possibilities." Ames, "Introduction," 5-6.

⁹⁶ Wilcox, "American Originals," 26.

has some interesting inventory marks. In the Morning Room stands a red and black, tablet-top Windsor armchair (F 11.53) with large, rounded arms, and a U-shaped seat (Figure 15). On the underside of the seat is a faded paper label with a handwritten caption reading "Jury Chair of Old Courthouse probably used at Newtown." On the back of the right leg, the chair also bears the mark of Mercer's personal inventory system. According to his records, the chair was a jury chair from the old courthouse in Doylestown which he bought from William Mason around 1913.⁹⁷ Another piece of seating furniture with a notable recorded history also exists in the Morning Room. A large antique couch (F 11.55), or day bed as it is called today, has Mercer's inventory mark on it. According to his notes, the object was:

Ancient Settle of the so-called Queen Anne period, from the Chapman family at Wrightstown. Once belonging to Dr. Isaac Chapman. Given to Mr. Mercer about 1900 by his cousin, Margaret Wiggins, now in Newtown. The wicker cover of this settle is an exact reproduction of the original still existing under it and was made for Mr. Mercer about 1900 by an old basket maker.⁹⁸

The 1930 inventory described this piece as "Antique Pennsylvania German Day Bed, Jacobean Style, Turned Legs and Stretchers, Original Split Seat, Adjustable Head Piece." and gave it a value of \$1,250.⁹⁹

97 Henry Chapman Mercer, "Inventory of collection of objects at Fonthill," TMs [photocopy], Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

98 Ibid.

99 "Probate inventory, 1930."

The reasons behind Mercer's use of antique furniture might involve his curatorial sensibilities. "Almost from the beginning, he intended Fonthill to be a museum as well as his personal residence, and displaying his collection of artifacts, prints, and tiles was a major factor in his plans."¹⁰⁰ As early as 1914, Mercer had decided to use the building as a museum for the study of tiles, and he began purchasing tiles from missionaries and dealers around the world. He ultimately collected 1,564 foreign tiles in addition to his own products. The imported tiles came from China, Persia, Germany, Spain, Holland, Tunisia, Italy, England, and even Babylon.¹⁰¹ He created "guides" to the tiles for most of the rooms of the house. These publications were typewritten manuscripts left unbound, or placed within crude pasteboard covers bound with linen tape at the side.¹⁰² Within each guide, Mercer noted the designs and subjects of the tile groups and their placement in the room. Each volume, therefore, serves as an inventory for the creator and a guidebook for the visitor.

Throughout his life, many distinguished guests, including John Philip Sousa, Marcel Duchamps, Victor Herbert, John Wanamaker, and Henry Ford, visited Fonthill to meet the man and his monument. Supposedly Ford was so taken with the objects inside

¹⁰⁰ Poos, *Fonthill*, 23.

¹⁰¹ Dyke, *Chronology*, 25.

¹⁰² Mercer created guides for the tiles and architectural elements in the Columbus Room, Saloon, Study, Map Room, East Room, Smoking Room, Terrace Kitchen, and Dormer, Morning, Yellow, and East Bedrooms. They remain in the collections of the Spruance Library, Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

the house that he offered to buy its contents from Mercer. His request enraged Mercer, who then canceled his plans to have Ford stay at Fonthill, and made him spend the night at a hotel instead.¹⁰³ Mercer kept guest books to record the names and comments of the numerous visitors who came to the house from America, Europe, Cuba, Egypt, Japan, and Australia. In 1914, James M. Wilcox wrote in the guest book that “One must be filled with a sense of responsibility if he stops to reflect that the influence of his life, whether good or bad, will go on forever.”¹⁰⁴ Mercer obviously intended for his influence to extend after his passing since bequeathed the house to the public to be used as a museum.

While Mercer was not as concerned with documenting the furnishings in his house as he was with recording information about the tiles, he does appear to have collected and displayed some furniture with a curatorial attitude in mind. He did have a personal inventory of the objects in the house which he considered to be important. This inventorying system involved assigning numbers to nearly two hundred decorative arts objects. The appropriate number then was written with yellow paint on the object; the numbers always sat within a triangle to distinguish this system from Mercer’s accession numbers for Mercer Museum objects. Objects from the museum made their way in and out of Fonthill as well. The free exchange between museum artifacts and house furnishings also might indicate that Mercer felt both environments were equal and shared

103 Poos, *Fonthill*, 53.

104 Bucks County Historical Society, “Handbook,” 61.

similar purposes.

The preponderance of Windsor furniture at Fonthill might have reflected Mercer's personal and curatorial predisposition. These objects, and indeed all of the furnishings in the house, also were part of his aesthetic sensibilities. He deliberately tried to create interesting artistic effects throughout the house. He delighted in the play of color and surfaces in his concrete architecture as he described the building:

Owing to the color of the Jersey gravel, gray cement, and bluish trap, the outer walls show soft gray-yellow with faint greenish reflections and, owing to the roughness of the forms, board welts, and porous spots not retouched, the texture is very rich as seen at a distance.¹⁰⁵

In his artistic endeavors, Mercer favored the use of contrasting colors and textures. In fact, his use of paint on every furniture surface, regardless of the building medium, relates to his utilization of colors in his tile production. The brightly-colored palette, set out in contradictory colors highlighting various components of an object, match the hues and treatment of his tile designs. Mercer expounded on the importance of divergent color schemes when he wrote that:

the value of contrast is largely depended upon. If it is not true that glazes look more rich and glossy against the dullest and grayest possible surfaces of cement, then we are wrong . . . If a rough-cast column, standing alone like a giant to support a ceiling's weight, easing itself under the load, as it were, and bowed to the strain--in other words, alive--cannot be glorified by touches of color thus applied at capital and base without any further apology or concealment, then the idea contended for is a mistake.¹⁰⁶

105 Bucks County Historical Society, *The Mercer Mile*, 16.

106 Bucks County Historical Society, "Handbook," 41.

The impact of dissimilar colors on different elements of the objects at Fonthill certainly produces the feelings of intrigue and delight Mercer hoped to achieve.

This survey of the furniture of Fonthill reveals some trends in Mercer's choice of furnishings for his home which reflect contemporary social trends, but, more importantly, emulate various aspects of Mercer's personality. He makes extensive use of built-in furniture, whether composed entirely of concrete or built of mixed media. He chose numerous wooden furnishings notable for the simplicity of their design and construction. As with using concrete to build the structure, he surrounded himself with modern materials such as metal bed frames. Pennsylvania German furnishings abound throughout the house, and he seemed overwhelmingly concerned with buying antique objects, especially Windsor chairs, rather than purchasing modern pieces. No matter what the furniture form, however, Mercer imparted his own personal touches to the pieces by recycling materials and painting their surfaces in a distinctive palette.

While these objects are expressions of period manners as expressed in the arts and crafts and colonial revival movements in America, they are best understood as possible testaments of Mercer's personality. He could have used the furnishings in the house as objects of artistic experimentation, as his individual interpretation of prevailing social trends, and as artifacts for cultural remembrance and study. He also might have viewed the furniture as symbols of an idealized past, historical documents to be recorded and displayed, and outlets for his artistic sensibilities. The furniture, then, deserves careful scrutiny for what it might reveal about the life and times of Henry Chapman Mercer.

CONCLUSION

The furniture of Fonthill provides an interesting case study concerning the relationship between material culture and the role of individual desires, tastes, and beliefs. While one can understand these objects as products of prevailing cultural movements, the most powerful significance of the forms and refinements of the furniture comes from their association with the mind of Henry Chapman Mercer. All too often, American material culture scholars contemplate the ways in which artifacts reflect and illuminate broad social trends, rather than examining objects for information about the lives of their designers, craftspeople, and consumers. The progression of material culture scholarship in America as defined by Thomas Schlereth emphasizes the absence of the individual from investigations in the field. The earliest period of study, from 1876 to 1948, was an "Age of Collecting." Scholars concerned themselves with objects noted for their historical associations, primacy of form or construction, and artistic merit. The next stage, the "Age of Description," lasted from 1948 to 1965. Most professionals in the field focused on issues such as connoisseurship and taxonomy, as they worked to classify artifacts which might provide insights into the American identity.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Thomas L. Schlereth, "Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976," chap. 1 in *Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville, Tennessee: American

Modern material culture studies exist in an "Age of Analysis," which began in 1965 and continues to the present day. Vernacularism and methodology interest contemporary scholars as they search for the typicality and the uniqueness of objects. To investigate such issues, material culture studies rely upon a variety of disciplines, such as art history, cultural history, social history. They use various ideological structures, including symbolist, environmentalist, functionalist, structuralist, and behavioralistic theories.¹⁰⁸ Even with such a copious arsenal of concepts at their disposal, many material culture specialists still converge their energies onto using objects to study cultural trends. The definition of material culture proffered by Jules Prown still seems to reflect the most prominent ideas. Prown declared that "Material culture is the study through artifacts of the beliefs--values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions--of a particular *community or society* at a given time [italics added]", and that objects "reveal beliefs of the *fabricating culture* [italics added]."¹⁰⁹

Current attitudes do seem to be shifting slowly toward recognizing the importance of individual agency in material culture studies. In the same publication in which Prown provided a culturally-oriented view of the meaning of objects, Dell Upton described a

Association for State and Local History Press, 1982), 7.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 42, 51, 58.

¹⁰⁹ Prown explains that the beliefs expressed in objects are often unconscious, or so deeply embedded in the culture that they are not manifested in many other ways. Jules David Prown, "Material Culture Studies: A Symposium," *Material Culture* 17 (Summer/Fall 1985): 77-78.

different approach to their study. Upton explained that "The symbolic order of artifacts is a product of *individual experience*, and artifactual meaning is always filtered through the *individual mind* [italics added]." ¹¹⁰ He went on to say that "Of the two--individual experience and social circumstance--the latter seems to be clearly the most important." ¹¹¹ Simon Bronner expanded upon these ideas when he wrote that "objects, made by human hands and having been extended properties of human bodies, bring human design and personality outward." ¹¹² Material culture scholars have the theoretical tools to unearth information about individual minds behind the object's matter. Behavioristic studies, for example, may prove beneficial to such investigations. Focusing on areas of domestic artifacts, psychology, and biography, behaviorism might be one way to consider the character of the particular people who plan, create, and use artifacts. ¹¹³ Without such studies, the meaning of the furniture of Fonthill and countless other objects would be diminished.

¹¹⁰ Dell Upton, "Material Culture Studies: A Symposium," *Material Culture* 17 (Summer/Fall 1985): 87.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Simon Bronner, *Grasping Things: Folk Material Culture and Mass Society in America* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 5.

¹¹³ Some examples of works which take a behavioralistic view of material culture are *The Hand-Made Object* by M. Jones (1975), *The Hidden Dimension* by E. Hall (1966), Dell Upton's "Toward a Performance Theory in Vernacular Architecture" in *Folklore Forum* (1979), and Simon Bronner's "Investigating Identity and Expression in Folk Art" in *Winterthur Portfolio* (1981). Schlereth, "Material Culture Studies," 59.

Three modern material culture theorists concerned with agency in the creation and consumption of goods are Ian Hodder, Grant McCracken, and Bernard Herman. The studies of each scholar aid in the understanding of the impact of agency upon commodities in ways which relate to Mercer's furnishing activities. When discussing the New Archaeology in *Reading the Past*, Hodder declared that knowing "that the individual needed to be part of theories of material culture" was one of the three cornerstones of this new manner of archaeological thought. Archaeologists can no longer be content to evaluate the larger cultural activities and norms represented in the built environment. Rather, the archaeologist must understand the relationship between society and the individual. After all, as Hodder noted, "all material culture is meaningfully constituted" by a particular person with a unique personality.¹¹⁴ Recognizing human agency in the midst of cultural systems provides a more complex and complete meaning of the object. While arts and crafts and colonial revival influences probably affected the furniture of Fonthill, ultimately it was Henry Chapman Mercer who chose to purchase and modify the furnishings in his home. Recreating personal agency is not a simple task, and the methodology required to effectuate such an endeavor still needs to be perfected. Hodder suggested that one must "immerse oneself in the contextual data, re-enacting the past through your own knowledge."¹¹⁵ Through the use of such historical imagination,

¹¹⁴ Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1-12.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

scholars might begin to see the person behind the product.

In his study of the evocative energy of objects in *Culture and Consumption*, Grant McCracken recognized how individual desires influence the meaning of artifacts. He explained how "Consumer goods are bridges to . . . hopes and ideals" for people who purchase objects. Sometimes the need for a particular item involves displaced meaning, a process by which the cultural significance of objects is removed from everyday existence and transferred to a different realm of experience. Artifacts serve as links to this far away world, which can consist of an idealized future, location, or, as evidenced with the furniture of Fonthill, a past era. People crave certain items which can transport them to their "personal 'golden age,'" so that "present difficulties and disappointments are rendered inert and hope allowed to sustain itself."¹¹⁶ Mercer, through furniture and architecture, certainly surrounded himself in an atmosphere of the past which provided refuge from the problems of the modern world. Recognizing that objects could serve such a personal need greatly enhances the interpretation of Mercer's furnishings, and provides a challenging way to consider the impact of other types of artifacts.

Lastly, the work of Bernard Herman provides another theoretical tool with which to understand the notion of agency in material culture studies. In an essay entitled "The *Bricoleur* Revisited," Herman explored the idea of the *bricoleur*, which appears

116 Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), 104-109.

prominently in the structuralist philosophy of Claude Levi-Strauss. The *bricoleur*, according to Levi-Strauss, has a fixed set of cultural instruments with which he freely experiments to fashion new combinations of meaning. *Bricolage*, as defined by Jack Santino, exists as the capability “to connect bits and pieces of culture from here and there to create an integral art form.” Herman interpreted both ideas to present an image of “the *bricoleur* standing in the scrapyards of experience and through a process of sorting and low-tech assemblage creating, compelling, meaningful narratives out of seemingly unrelated objects and events.” Henry Chapman Mercer, standing in the scrapyards of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, epitomizes the figure of the *bricoleur*, as he took disparate furnishing materials which existed within established social conventions and experimented with them to produce a story all his own. His tale, like the meaning fashioned by any *bricoleur*, was “imaginative and *personal* [italics added].”¹¹⁷

During this “Age of Analysis,” material culture scholars would do well to follow the example of studies by theorists such as Hodder, McCracken, and Herman, and intensify their investigations into the importance of agency. Understanding the impact of individual beliefs, tastes, and desires provides a vital and valuable component to any study of objects and their meaning. As Henry Glassie wrote, “Individuals make history

¹¹⁷ Later in the essay, Herman put Levi-Strauss’ theory into practice by using the concept of the *bricoleur* to interpret the material world of Alice and Scotland Hill, an African-American couple living in Wilmington, Delaware in the early nineteenth century. Bernard L. Herman, “The *Bricoleur* Revisited,” in *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field*, ed. Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison (Winterthur, Delaware: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1997), 38, 46.

as surely as history makes them; the lone mind is the locus of all connection, and biography is the very type of historiography.”¹¹⁸ Certainly the mind of Henry Chapman Mercer was the center of meaning for every aspect of the built environment in his residence. After all, “Fonthill is Mercer’s biography, told in tile.”¹¹⁹ This study hopes to reveal that one important chapter of this biography appears in the furniture of Fonthill, which might reflect Mercer’s character in important, powerful ways. As forms which challenge material culture scholars to broaden their understanding of the significance of objects and the nature of agency, this furniture is a fitting legacy to one of the finest minds who ever contributed to the field.

¹¹⁸ Glassie even stated that “Biography is history’s real substance.” Henry Glassie, “Meaningful Things and Appropriate Myths: The Artifact’s Place in American Studies,” in *Material Life in America, 1600-1800*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Boston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 65.

¹¹⁹ Helen Gemmill, “Original, Alone, and Unique,” 39.

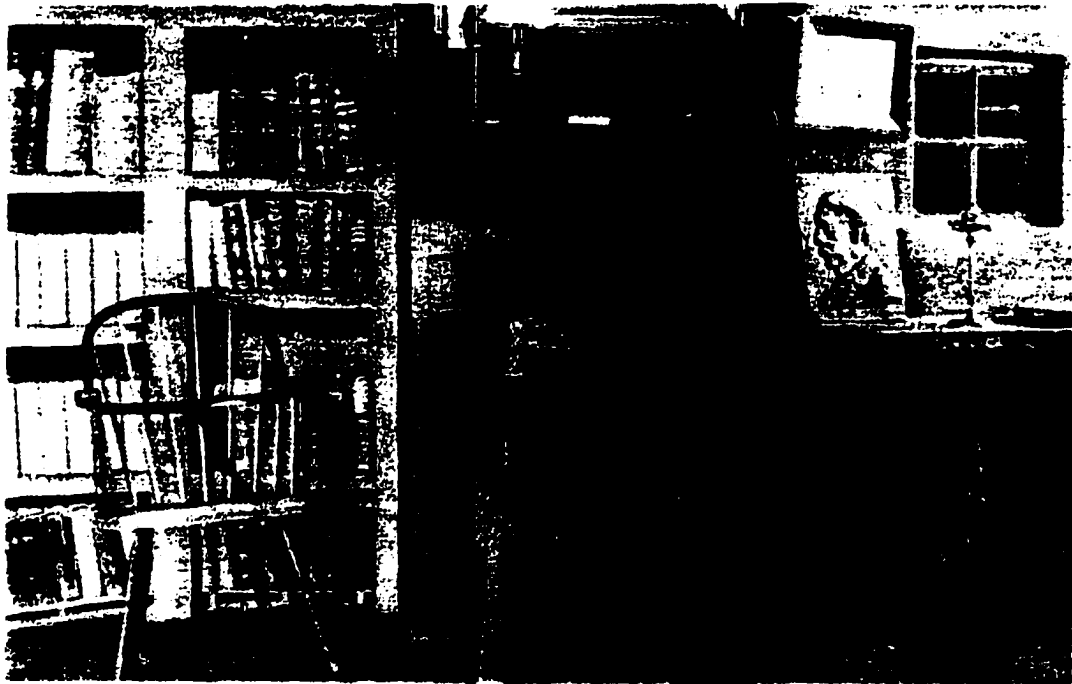


Figure 1. Built-in concrete bookcases flank the school master's dēsk, Fonthill accession number F 11.239, in the Saloon. Photograph taken by author, Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

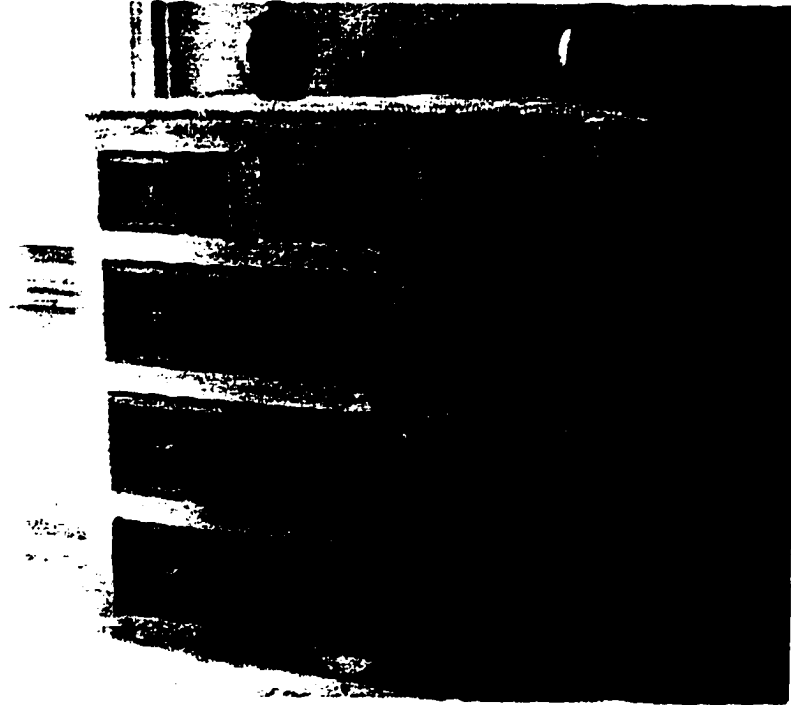


Figure 2. Chest of drawers with concrete frame and wooden drawers in the Columbus Room. Photograph taken by author. Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

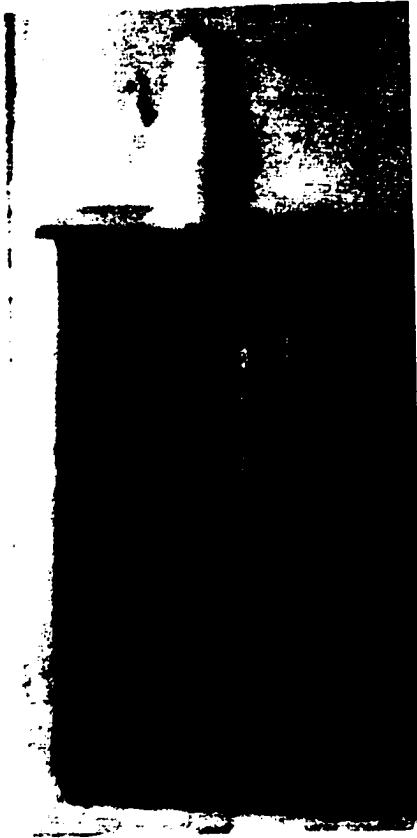


Figure 3. Wooden cupboard. Fonthill accession number F 11.46, in the Terrace Bedroom. Photograph taken by author. Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.



Figure 4. Stack of wooden bookcases in the Library. Photograph taken by author.
Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.



Figure 5. Bank of wooden bookcases in the Study. Photograph taken by author. Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

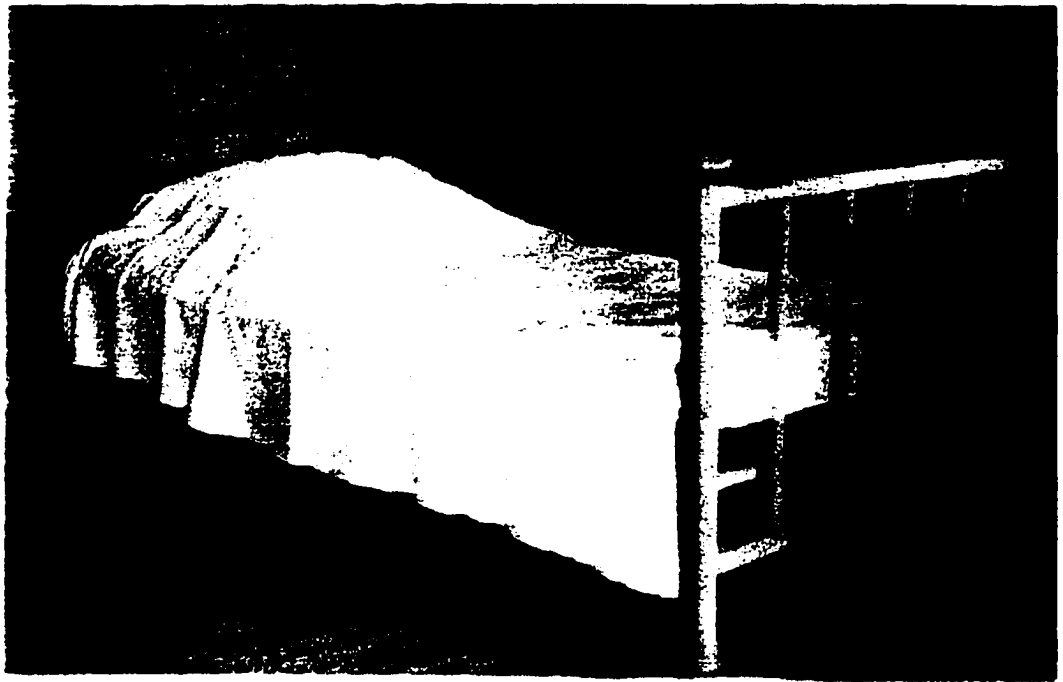


Figure 6. Metal bed. Fonthill accession number F 41.78, in the Dormer Bedroom.
Photograph taken by author. Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

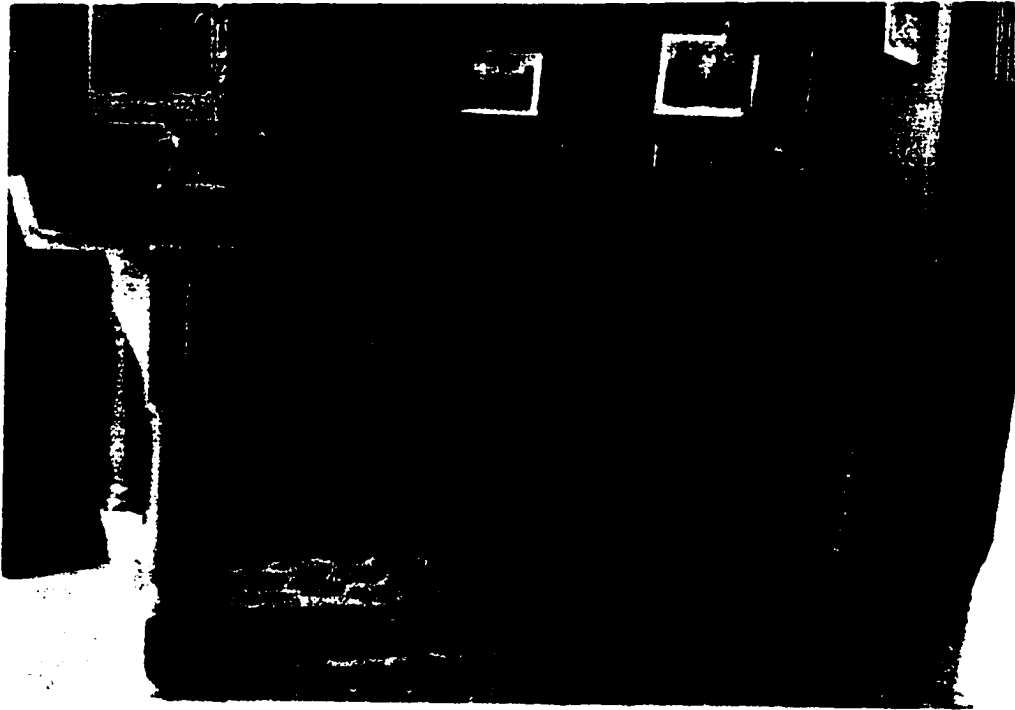


Figure 7. Pennsylvania German table, Fonthill accession number F 11.263, in the Library. Photograph taken by author. Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.



Figure 8. Pennsylvania German chest. Fonthill accession number F 11.241. in the Saloon. Photograph taken by author. Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.



Figure 9. Chest of drawers. Fonthill accession number F 11.48. in the Terrace Bedroom.
Photograph taken by author, Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

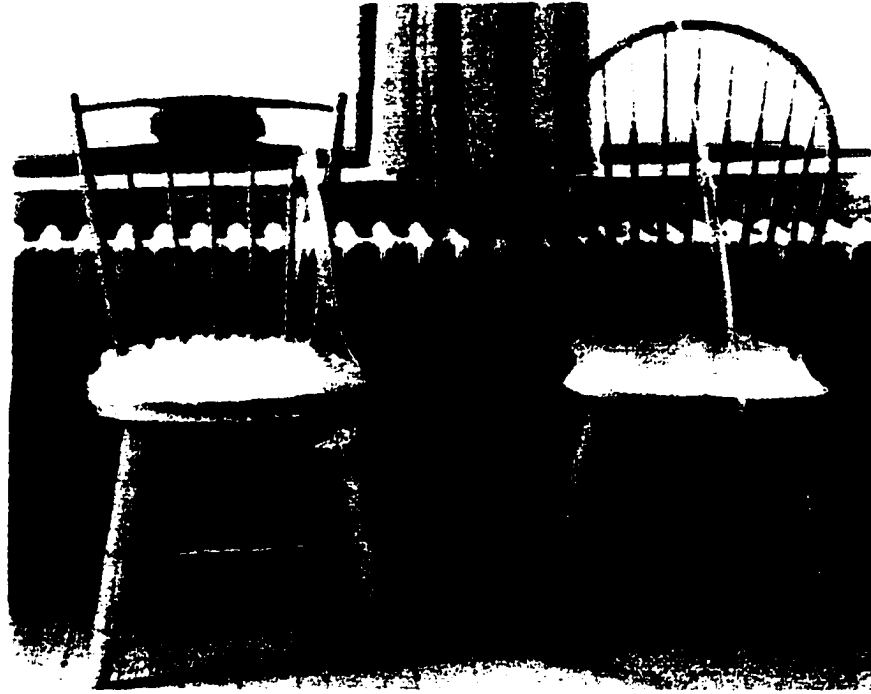


Figure 10. Windsor side chairs in the Yellow Bedroom. A square-back Windsor, Fonthill accession number F 11.17, is on the left, and a bow-back Windsor, Fonthill accession number F 11.18, is on the right. Photograph taken by author, Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.



Figure 11. Three Windsor side chairs in the East Bedroom. Two square-back Windsors. Fonthill accession number F 11.08 on the left and Fonthill accession number F 11.06 on the right, flank a tablet-top Windsor, Fonthill accession number F 11.09. Photograph taken by author, Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.



Figure 12. Sack-back Windsor armchair, Fonthill accession number F 11.21, in the Study. Photograph taken by author, Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.



Figure 13. Windsor settee. Fonthill accession number F 11.27. in the Columbus Room.
Photograph taken by author. Fonthill Museum. Doylestown, Pennsylvania.



Figure 14. Sofa, Fonthill accession number F 50.05, in the Study. Photograph taken by author, Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.



Figure 15. Tablet-top Windsor armchair, Fonthill accession number F 11.53, in the Morning Room. Photograph taken by author, Fonthill Museum, Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

APPENDIX: INVENTORY OF SURVEYED FURNITURE

Note: All locations current as of October 1997. Fonthill accession numbers given when available.

Columbus Room

| <u>Object</u> | <u>Accession Number</u> |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Sack-back Windsor armchair | F 11.29 |
| Sack-back Windsor armchair | F 11.33 |
| Concrete and wood chest of drawers | |
| Windsor settee | F 11.27 |

Dormer Bedroom

| <u>Object</u> | <u>Accession Number</u> |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Metal bed | F 41.78 |
| Sack-back Windsor armchair | F 11.22 |
| Tablet-top Windsor side chair | F 11.36 |
| Chest of drawers | F 11.34 |
| Cupboard | F 11.35 |
| Table | F 11.39 |
| Concrete and wood wardrobe | |

East Bedroom

| <u>Object</u> | <u>Accession Number</u> |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Metal bed | F 41.15 |
| Square-back Windsor side chair | F 11.06 |
| Square-back Windsor side chair | F 11.08 |
| Tablet-top Windsor side chair | F 11.09 |
| Concrete and wood chest of drawers | |
| Cupboard | F 11.05 |

Library

| <u>Object</u> | <u>Accession Number</u> |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Built-in concrete bookcases | |
| Wooden bookcases | |
| Sack-back Windsor armchair | F 11.258 |
| Sack-back Windsor armchair | F 11.259 |
| Square-back Windsor armchair | F 11.254 |
| Square-back Windsor armchair | F 11.256 |
| Fan-back Windsor side chair | F 11.255 |
| Tall clock | F 40.05 |
| Piano | F 11.253 |
| Sofa | F 50.49 |
| Table | F 11.257 |
| Table | F 11.260 |
| Table | F 11.263 |

Morning Room

| <u>Object</u> | <u>Accession Number</u> |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| High-back Windsor armchair | F 11.51 |
| High-back Windsor armchair | F 11.52 |
| Sack-back Windsor armchair | F 11.56 |
| Tablet-top Windsor armchair | F 11.53 |
| Square-back Windsor side chair | F 11.49 |
| Square-back Windsor side chair | F 11.57 |
| Square-back Windsor side chair | F 11.59 |
| Chest | F 11.60 |
| Couch | F 11.55 |
| Concrete and wood chest of drawers | |
| Windsor settee | F 11.58 |
| Breakfast table | F 11.61 |
| Table | F 11.54 |
| Tea table | F 11.50 |

Saloon

| <u>Object</u> | <u>Accession Number</u> |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Built-in concrete bookcases | |
| Freestanding concrete bookcase | |
| Wooden bookcases | |
| Moravian chair | F 11.235 |

Saloon, continued

| <u>Object</u> | <u>Accession Number</u> |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Moravian chair | F 11.250 |
| Square-back Windsor side chair | F 11.243 |
| Square-back Windsor side chair | F 11.244 |
| Square-back Windsor side chair | F 11.245 |
| Square-back Windsor side chair | F 11.246 |
| Tablet-top Windsor side chair | F 11.247 |
| Chest | F 11.241 |
| Desk | F 11.239 |
| Desk | F 11.240 |
| Stool | F 11.238 |
| Breakfast table | F 11.249 |
| Table | F 11.236 |
| Table | F 11.242 |
| Table | F 11.251 |

Study

| <u>Object</u> | <u>Accession Number</u> |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Wooden bookcase and desk combinations | |
| Sack-back Windsor armchair | F 11.21 |
| Bow-back Windsor side chair | F 11.32 |
| Square-back Windsor side chair | F 11.23 |
| Tablet-top Windsor side chair | F 11.40 |
| Desk | F 11.24 |
| Sofa | F 50.05 |
| Stool | F 11.41 |
| Table | F 11.38 |

Terrace Bedroom

| <u>Object</u> | <u>Accession Number</u> |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Metal bed | F 41.111 |
| Sack-back Windsor armchair | F 11.70 |
| Square-back Windsor side chair | F 11.72 |
| Chest of drawers | F 11.48 |
| Breakfast table | F 11.49 |
| Built-in concrete table | |
| Gateleg table | F 11.71 |

Yellow Bedroom

| <u>Object</u> | <u>Accession Number</u> |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Metal bed | F 41.22 |
| High-back Windsor armchair | F 11.11 |
| Bow-back Windsor side chair | F 11.18 |
| Square-back Windsor side chair | F 11.17 |
| Concrete and wood chest of drawers | |
| Cupboard | F 11.12 |
| Built-in concrete table | |
| Concrete and wood wardrobes | |

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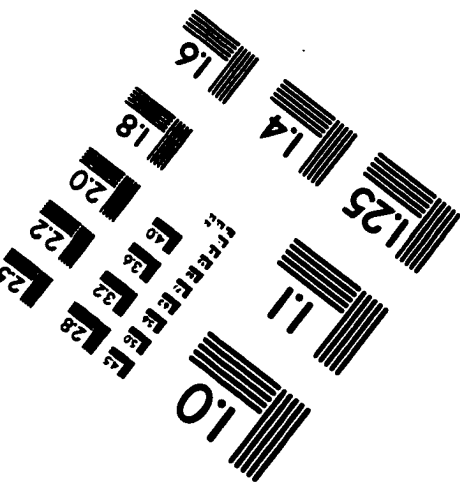
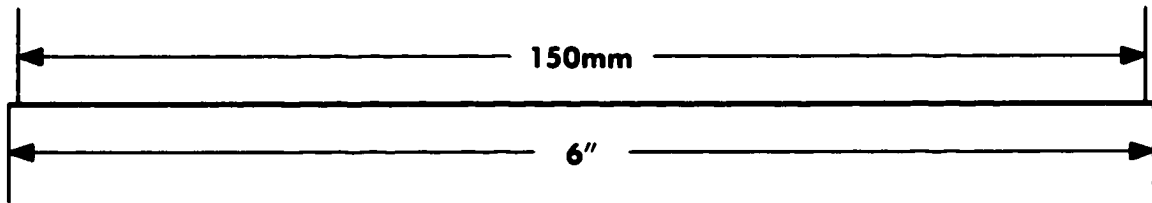
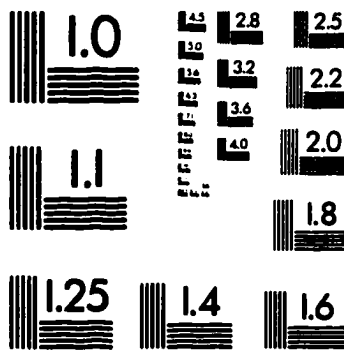
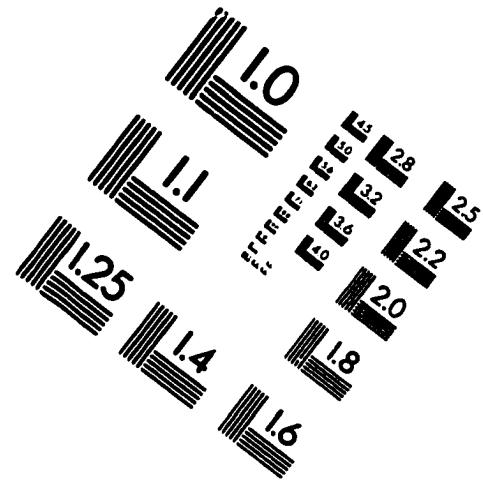
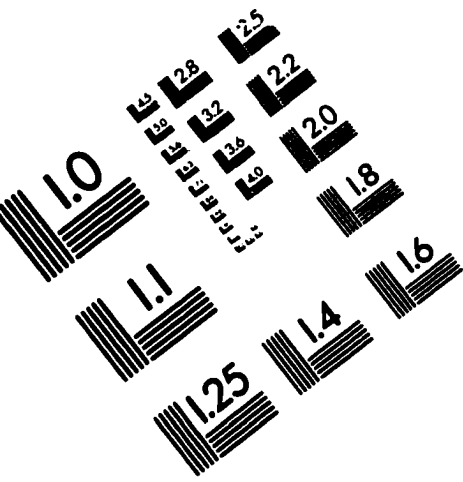
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