



***A Collections Conversation, “The New York Card Table”***  
**Wednesday, December 10, 2008, 12:30pm**  
**In the Belle Vue Room**  
**Presentation by Karen L. Daly, Executive Director**

Slide 1. Good afternoon and welcome to Dumbarton House for the second in our bimonthly series of Collections Conversation.

My name is Karen Daly and I’m the executive director here and I’m thrilled you have all joined me this afternoon.

As I believe you all know, our focus today will be this Federal New York mahogany card table, circa 1790, you see here.

While I am by no means an expert in early American antiques, I have been intrigued by this card table since I first started here at Dumbarton House over 5 years ago. Certainly the delicate and refined form of the table appealed to me, but I was also struck by the social history surrounding the piece. The seeming coarseness of card playing seemed such a contrast to the refined elegance of the table itself.

What a coincidence when last night, as I was reviewing my notes for our conversation today, I caught sight of my husband glued to the travel channel in our tv room watching with keen interest the World Poker Tour being broadcast from Las Vegas. While certainly much has changed since early Americans played cards on our card table here, I was struck by how universal the appeal of card playing remains even today.

In our conversation today I’ll touch briefly on the appeal of card playing in early America and will also attempt to answer the following questions—what is a card table? How was it used? What characteristics identify our table as a Federal period example? And how can we tell that it was made in New York?

Slide 2. Before we begin:

How many of you are new to Dumbarton House?

Some quick background to explain how this card table came to be a part of the Dumbarton House collection:

Dumbarton House was built in 1800 and lived in continuously until 1928, when it was purchased by The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America to serve as their national headquarters.

Do we have any Dames in the group this afternoon?

From 1930-1932 the National Society set about a major restoration effort—to return the historic house to original grandeur.

Slide 3. Leading the restoration effort was this woman—Mrs. Joseph Rucker Lamar. Mrs. Lamar, the wife of a supreme court justice and a former president of the National Society—played a key role in the purchase of Dumbarton House and then chaired its restoration committee.

Once restored, she also played a vital role in the furnishing of the property—donating a number of 18th and early 19th century antiques thought to be appropriate for a grand Georgetown estate of the early Federal period.

Slide 4. Among the donations given by Mrs. Lamar in 1932 in memory of her husband (supreme court justice from 1911-his death in 1916), was the card table on which we focus today's talk shown here in the upper left. According to early catalogue records, the Lamars had used the table in their Washington home during Justice Lamar's tenure on the Supreme Court.

A card table was indeed a very appropriate piece for a house of this period.

In fact, with the exception of chairs, no other furniture form from the Federal period survives in such great a number as card tables do. Hundreds of them have been passed down—hinting at the thousands that must have been in use during the period.

They are so numerous, that furniture scholars and social historians agree that without a doubt card tables were used for far more than just card-playing.

- Prints and portraits from the period depict them being used as writing tables (complete with inkstand, quill pens, and papers) as well as dining tables.
- Additionally, the card table form worked very well within the symmetrical decorative arrangement so popular during the period. We see card tables frequently made and purchased as pairs—and could be placed (when not in use) against the wall as pier tables between window or next to mantles. In the Lower Passage of our museum upstairs, for example, we place 2 (closed) Massachusetts card tables across from each other under looking glasses for decoration.

From primary source material we know specifically that Joseph Nourse—the first resident of Dumbarton House—purchased 2 card tables for 9 pounds (a hefty sum at the time) in 1784 around the time of his marriage in Philadelphia.

Slide 5. While used for many purposes, card tables could indeed be used (as you would expect) for playing cards.

In this London engraving and etching from 1805 we see a group of 6 engaged in a game of Pope-Joan. They're seated around an open card table—covered with green baize (felt) to protect the surface during the game.

While gambling on card games was typically reserved for taverns, playing more refined games was common throughout the early nation in private households. Popular games included Whist (considered the forerunner of Bridge), the simpler loo, and more complicated quadrille.

According to Gerald W. R. Ward, considered to be an authority on card playing in the early nation, card playing cut so widely across economic, social, and geographic boundaries that it was basically a universal form of recreation in the Federal period.

An 1803 quote illustrates that even the most refined of Americans enjoyed the pastime: Samuel Harrison Smith (publisher of Washington's major newspaper "National Intelligencer") wrote to a friend "What do you think of my going to such an extent as to win 2 dollars at loo the first time I ever played the game, and being the most successful at the table? I confess I felt some mortification at putting the money of Mrs. Madison ... into my pocket."

To play many of the games enjoyed by early Americans like Mrs. Madison and Mr. Smith, gaming counters or chips were used.

Slide 6. Here we see a detailed image of a counter in the Dumbarton House collection. Federal card tables were less specialized than their earlier counterparts (since they were used for multiple purposes) and most lacked built in compartments for cards & chips. So, often mother of pearl or ivory gaming counters would be stored in small boxes for easy transport to the table during a game.

Slide 7. Moving back to our Dumbarton House mahogany card table we find an excellent example of the early Federal period aesthetic in American furniture design. Spanning from about 1790 to about 1830, the Federal period of design was marked by an infusion of neoclassical elements. Furniture from the EARLY Federal period, lasting until about 1815 or so, is frequently described as light and airy—a description that could certainly be applied to our example here.

Here you see a rectangular top with ovolo corners (the name for these inset quarter-round shapes) supported by delicate square tapered, cuffed legs. The piece not only looks light—but actually is light; it could easily be moved from room to room to be used as needed within the household.

The decoration of the piece is also quintessentially early Federal—simple, 2-dimensional elements like veneers and inlay in different color woods are used throughout the piece. In addition to this pictorial inlay, which we'll come back to in a moment, there is delicate stringing on the legs; bands of horizontal stringing near the bottom of the legs; oval stringing on the skirt; and light bands of stringing along the base of the skirt.

This inlay creates a visual play between the light and dark woods. It also would have established the price for the piece—the more decorative inlay and embellishment, the higher the price tag. According to noted decorative arts scholar David L. Barquist, the use of stringing and banding remained immensely popular in NY furniture making until about 1810, when it began to be replaced by carving and reeding.

Now contrast this early Federal piece with its lightness and airiness, its 2-dimensional, flat decoration to...

Slide 8. This late Federal or Empire card table—also New York—from 1820.

We still see the strong influence of neoclassicism in this table—note the dolphins supporting the table surface, and the acanthus leaves leading to the lion's paw feet—but the delicate nature of the early Federal table is completely replaced by an incredibly strong horizontal emphasis—here in the top.

Slide 9. Note too, that the decoration on this empire table is entirely 3-dimensional carving—a stark contrast to the delicate flat inlay of our 1790 table.

Slide 10. While its design, then, helps us to date the ca. 1790 piece, it also helps us to locate the maker.

Following the Revolution, New York City saw tremendous growth, surpassing Philadelphia as the largest American city by 1825 and becoming a leading center of furniture making in the new republic. Luckily for us, a number of pricebooks from the late 18th and early 19th century survive—providing us with clues to the styles popular with furniture makers in that city.

Our table includes 2 key features that point to a New York origin—the most obvious of which is probably its fifth leg—barely visible in this slide in the shadow. Card tables from most other regions during this period featured 4 legs—3 fixed, and 1 hinged to support the table surface when opened for use.

An 1802 NYC pricebook, however, dictates the common card table form as having “four fast legs and one fly leg”. Philip D. Zimmerman, another noted authority on NY card tables, points out that any benefit to stability offered by this 5th leg (presumably the purpose for it) was mitigated by the asymmetrical appearance of the back legs when the table was displayed in the closed position.

Slide 11. Another challenge caused by the 5th leg—illustrated even in our museum interpretation upstairs shown here—is the location of all those legs when trying to arrange seats around the table for a card game.

Slide 12. In addition to the 5th leg, the distinctive inlay on the dies also identifies the piece as a New York example.

At first thought to be a flame and sword, the design has been confirmed to be, instead, the Prince of Wales feather. Made popular initially by Hepplewhite's design books, the Prince of Wales feather design was embraced by New York furniture makers during the

Federal period—appearing in a carved form as the backs of chairs and in inlay on a variety of furniture forms.

The design is a stylized version of the badge of the Prince of Wales--  
Slide 13. Seen more accurately in this English tea box. Three silver (or white) feathers rising through a gold coronet of crosses and fleur-de-lys comprise the badge.

If you focus on the middle feather...

Slide 14. You can clearly see the resemblance here in our table. Rather than a sword, the cross here is the cross from the crown, with the feather rising behind it.

While we have been able to date the table based on its form, and determine its location of origin based on its style—further research is needed to identify its maker or the shop from which it came. (I'm happy to chat with anyone in the audience who might be looking for an opportunity to be a volunteer researcher!)

Slide 15. And certainly, there is much more to be learned about this card table and card tables in general from the Federal period. If you're interested in more I would point you toward the sources I used while preparing today's presentation—listed here.

And of course, you are welcome to tour Dumbarton House where docents can share with you not only this card table, but 8 others on view in our historic house museum upstairs. I think you'll see that they're far more refined than those being used on the World Poker Tour today!

Thank you for joining us this afternoon, and please do share with me any questions you might have.

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