

**Furnishing Community: The Role of Margolis Furniture in the Lives of  
Hartford's Gentile and Jewish Families,  
1920-1970**

  
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## **Dedication**

There is truly no one who deserves my gratitude more than the extraordinary man to whom I am lucky enough to be married. He has born the brunt of my research — supported it, encouraged it, taken joy and pleasure in it, and always believed that it was important work that should be done. He has been there with me from the beginning. I am, happily, forever in his debt. Elliott—YOU are the ONE.

**The furniture sings**

Nickolas Kotula, apprentice cabinetmaker in the Margolis shop 1967-1972  
July 17, 2003

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## **INTRODUCTION**

At the turn of the twentieth century, Hartford was at the center of the Colonial Revival movement and Nathan Margolis (1873-1925) was the most sought after craftsman of Colonial Revival furniture at this time. The popularity of the Margolis firm continued under Nathan's son Harold whose clients from both the Jewish and the gentile communities acquired their finely crafted reproductions with, at times, an unheard of passion. Although on the surface both groups appeared to be similarly motivated in their acquisition of Margolis pieces on closer inspection a more complicated picture is revealed.

During the firm's most productive years, between 1920 and 1950, the Margolis firm received commissions from John D. Rockefeller, III; Pierre du Pont, III; the Connecticut Governor's Residence; the Hartford Old State House; Aetna Life and Casualty Insurance Co.; and Temple Beth Israel. In addition, the company's clientele included several of Hartford's, prosperous Jewish immigrant families, as well as its Protestant Brahmins. In general, Hartford clients were inspired by the prevailing taste for colonial furniture and were motivated to buy for a number of reasons: a respect for hand craftsmanship, the belief that traditional values were inherent in these revival forms, and as a confirmation of their own refinement and taste.

However, there are more specific questions about the Margolis clients that will be addressed here. Who bought Margolis furniture? What place did they hold in the community? Why did they buy? What significance did the furniture have for them?

Did Jewish and gentile families order different styles? What motivated Jewish families to decorate in the Colonial Revival style? Was it the desire to assimilate or merely to create a “tasteful” environment? Why did gentile families collect Margolis reproductions along with their period antiques?

To answer these questions, this paper will trace the role of the Margolis firm from its early beginnings under the direction of Nathan, and, after 1925, under the supervision of his son Harold, until its closure in 1974 when the shop’s records were purchased by the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum. In the process, the significance of the firm and its wares on the lives of both the established gentile and newly prosperous Jewish immigrant families in Hartford will be examined in detail. Particular attention will be paid to an analysis of the reasons Margolis furniture was acquired, and the changing demographics of the firm’s clientele over time.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

**Nathan Margolis**

Nathan Margolis was born in 1873, in Janova, in the Kovna province of Russia. Janova was a bustling town on the Vilna river, conveniently close to a railroad and surrounded by abundant forests. It was known for its “expert designers and craftsmen ... [who] produced fine furniture which was shipped all over Russia and abroad.”<sup>1</sup> Nathan’s uncle, Samuel Margolis, was the town’s principal cabinetmaker, whose shop was well situated on the main thoroughfare. Samuel’s brother Charles and Charles’s sons Nathan, Simon, Reuben, Abraham, and Jacob,<sup>2</sup> all worked together.<sup>3</sup> The shop made what Harold Margolis later called “provincial furniture for the country folk” as well as more sophisticated pieces from native walnut in the French style for noblemen and gentry living in the surrounding area.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Melamed, *Janova* (Cincinnati: Janova Press, Inc. 1976), 6. Janova was the home of many cabinet making and repair shops and provided training for many important cabinetmakers. Those who came to America included Nathan’s cousin Samuel Winick (also spelled Wineck) whose Hartford antique shop, established in the early nineteenth century, “had become one of the best-known business establishments” with a clientele that “included President William Howard Taft, the [D]u Pont family and Henry Ford.” David G. Dalin and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Making A Life Building A Community: A History of the Jews of Hartford* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1997), 56. The New York antique dealers Ginsberg and Levy and Israel Sack were also from Janova. Harold Margolis, Untitled (unknown Museum, Reading, Pa., 15 November 1978, transcript, Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford, West Hartford CT). In Janova, Israel Sack apprenticed with Nathan’s father Charles. Harold Margolis to Charles F. Montgomery, 19 May 1964, Downs Collection, Box 28.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob “Jake” went on to some fame in the antiques trade in New York and was the consultant to Francis P. Garvan whose early-American furniture collection is housed at the Yale University Art Museum, New Haven CT. Israel Sack, *American Treasure Hunt* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1968), 203.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Margolis, “The Margolis Family of Craftsmen” (lecture, Hartford Jewish Community Center, West Hartford CT, 13 December 1978), transcript, Margolis folder, Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford, West Hartford CT, [unpaginated].

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

In 1891, at the age of eighteen, Nathan left Janova for London to work in the prestigious Gillow shop, specializing in furniture that was “small in scale, elegant in line, and fine in quality of timber and workmanship....”<sup>5</sup> The company’s reputation was based on its emphasis on form rather than ornament and on its use of beautiful woods,<sup>6</sup> characteristics that would later describe the work of the Margolis shop in Hartford. A year later, Nathan was joined by other family members at Gillow.<sup>7</sup> The Margolis men learned English methods of reproducing the eighteenth-century designs of Chippendale, Hepplewhite, and others. According to Harold, Nathan became particularly interested in the Chippendale style at this time.<sup>8</sup> Nathan most probably learned how to construct chairs at Gillow, a skill not practiced in his grandfather’s shop in Janova.<sup>9</sup> Gillow marketed its furniture to both the upper and middle-classes and Nathan did the same in Hartford. The Margolis family, and Nathan in particular, learned valuable lessons from this relatively short apprenticeship.

In 1893, Nathan came to America and joined other relatives in Hartford.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lindsay Boynton, *Gillow Furniture Designs 1760-1800* (Royston: Bloomfield Press, 1995), 15. Gillow joined with Waring in 1897 and the firm became known as Gillow & Waring until the business dissolved in 1938. *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Margolis, lecture, 15 November 1978.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* I have not been able to identify the individual family members who joined Nathan at Gillow.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* Gillow was particularly prominent during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, specializing in inlaid and satinwood furniture. The current scholarship suggests that Gillow was the originator of designs that have traditionally been attributed to Sheraton and Hepplewhite. The firm never published a book of its own designs. Boynton, *Gillow*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Margolis, interview by Donald Fennimore, 13 October 1976, audiotape, Downs Collection, Box 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Pauline Margolis, Harold’s widow (now deceased) indicated that Nathan’s cousin Samuel Wineck, a Hartford cabinetmaker, who had immigrated from Janova in 1888, encouraged him to come to Hartford. Pauline Margolis, interview by Helen Psarakis, “‘Antiques of the Future:’ The Nathan Margolis Shop 1925-1953.” (master’s thesis, State University of New York College at Oneonta, Cooperstown Graduate

The following year he opened a shop on Asylum Street <sup>11</sup> with his father Charles and his brothers, specializing in furniture repairs and second-hand furniture.<sup>12</sup> Geer's 1883 Hartford City Directory lists five cabinetmakers and thirteen furniture repairers in Hartford that year, indicative of a wealthy community of craftsmen.<sup>13</sup>

Nathan soon began to sell reproductions of furniture that had been brought to the shop for repair and were admired by other customers. He based some of his pieces on the pattern books of Chippendale, Hepplewhite, and Sheraton, and also copied directly from originals in the Metropolitan Museum.<sup>14</sup>

Shortly after Nathan first arrived in Hartford, a chance encounter with Everett Lake, who was later to become Connecticut's Governor (1921-1923), proved fortuitous. Lake, whose family owned the lumber yard that Nathan frequented "noticed ... [Nathan] turning over lumber, looking for the right texture, the right color," and was impressed by the young man's patience and determination.<sup>15</sup> Nathan repaired a chair for Lake, who was exceptionally pleased with the result. Word gradually spread to Lake's neighbors on fashionable Prospect Avenue, and the business grew.

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Program, 1995), 4.

<sup>11</sup> The shop moved to 54 Pratt Street (unknown date). In 1905, the business moved to (28-30) High Street where it remained until it closed in 1974. Many of the workers in the shop were from Janova. Harold Margolis, interview, 13 October 1976.

<sup>12</sup> This second-hand furniture was probably antique. Harold Margolis, lecture, 15 November 1978. The shop also sold silver, rugs, and works of art. Harold Margolis, interview, 13 October 1976.

<sup>13</sup> 1893 *Geer's Hartford City Directory: July 1893* (Hartford: The Hartford Printing Company, 1893), 561, 573. Nathan's listing in the directory read: Margoli[n]s Nathan, cabinetmaker at 25 Sheldon, [information about Nathan's work at this address is not available] b. [boarding] 280 Front. Geer's 1893, 207.

<sup>14</sup> "Nationally Known Cabinet Maker Dead," *The Hartford Daily Courant*, 9 February 1925, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Harold Margolis, lecture, 13 December 1978.

Nathan was known to his family as a perfectionist.<sup>16</sup> According to his obituary in *The Hartford Daily Courant*, “(w)hen completed, his work would often match the originals in material and color so as often to make it impossible to distinguish between the antique from the copy.”<sup>17</sup> By 1920, repairs and restorations took a back seat to his reproduction work.<sup>18</sup> The antiques dealer and author Harold Sack, wrote of Margolis, “Nathan’s work was equal to the best of the eighteenth-century craftsmen; local people who loved the great forms of the early period but did not have the passion or the funds to accumulate originals could and did buy beautiful reproductions from him.”<sup>19</sup>

Nathan died suddenly in 1925 at the age of 52, (ill.1) leaving behind his wife Rachel and five children, Beatrice, Ruth, Harold, Florence, and Irving. Harold, the eldest son, took over the family business. He managed the shop much like his father before him, using immigrant cabinetmakers to make reproductions of pieces in museum collections and selling to both the established gentile and newly prosperous Jewish immigrant families in the Hartford area.

The Margolis shop on High Street was basic and functional (ill.2). The walls were painted and a curtain divided the few stock items from the workroom, with no formal showroom. Although most pieces were custom ordered, the shop did stock some

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Margolis, Nathan's grandnephew, interview by author, February 24, 2003. According to family lore, Nathan also had a temper. If a workman produced something that was not to his liking, he was known to smash it with instructions that it be put back together properly in the morning.

<sup>17</sup> “Cabinet Maker Dead,” *The Hartford Daily Courant*, 9 February 1925.

<sup>18</sup> Harold Margolis, interview, by Charles Montgomery, 19 May 1964, audiotape, Downs Collection, Box 4.

<sup>19</sup> Sack, *American Treasure Hunt*, 203. During one summer Harold Sack had a “temporary job with Nathan in his shop... in Hartford.” *Ibid.*, 203.

furniture. Approximately fifteen to eighteen chairs, twenty-six to thirty candle stands, and some mirrors were kept on hand, because these styles proved to be the “bread and butter of the business.”<sup>20</sup> When potential customers came to the shop, Harold, who enjoyed explaining the business, took the time to educate them about different woods and the many steps and skills necessary to produce a quality product (ill. 3). In an effort to promote the shop Harold promised in his advertisements that Margolis furniture would become the “Antiques of the Future,”<sup>21</sup> and that the furniture was “[r]eplicas that you can mention in your Will.” Margolis furniture he assured future clients, “graced the homes of discriminating lovers of fine things and serve[s] as a constant reminder to future generations of your good taste and foresight.” He emphasized the fact that “[a] piece of Margolis furniture is not a mere copy. It is a duplicate of the original, absolutely identical in every detail,”<sup>22</sup> and stressed the long-standing traditions of this family owned firm: “For three generations, the name Margolis....”<sup>23</sup>

Over the years Harold also engineered a series of exhibitions that kept the firm in the public eye. As early as 1927, he set up a room tableau of Margolis furniture in the

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<sup>20</sup> Margolis, interview, 13 October 1976.

<sup>21</sup> This phrase was issued a copyright by the United States on October 26, 1928, Downs Collection, Box 1. Harold later acknowledged that furniture produced after 1840 would never be considered truly antique. Harold Margolis, interview, 13 October 1976.

<sup>22</sup> Despite the advertising copy, Harold was not committed to the idea of making only “identical” copies. “I have never felt that just because a piece was an antique, it must be copied exactly as the original—usage and proportions do change and there is always room for some improvement to meet changing times and the way of life.” Harold Margolis to Mr. Colin C. Carpi, General Interiors (Kittinger), 20 September 1969, Downs Collection, Box 28.

<sup>23</sup> Margolis shop advertisements, Downs Collection, Box 38. Local estate auctions mentioned Margolis pieces in their upcoming sales. For example, two important pieces from “the late N. Margolis,” were singled out in the announcement of the estate auction of Spencer Goodwin, *The Hartford Courant*, 10 May

window of the Hartford Electric Light Company (ill. 4).<sup>24</sup> In 1930, he arranged for an exhibition at the Bushnell Memorial: "Beautiful Antique Reproductions an Exhibit of Nathan Margolis Shop...."<sup>25</sup> (ills. 5-7) In 1928, he orchestrated an exhibition of Margolis' miniature furniture at the Children's Museum in West Hartford (ill. 8).<sup>26</sup>

Harold was a pragmatic businessman. He often combined elements from different pieces to satisfy a customer's needs.<sup>27</sup> He would create a blockfront secretary by marrying the bottom half of a Connecticut piece to a design for the top half found at the Metropolitan Museum. He believed that he had combined "the best features of both."<sup>28</sup> He made further adjustments by scaling-down pieces, by making tables expandable and adding leaves, even converting a full-size bed into twins.<sup>29</sup> When historically accurate woods were not available, he used locally available stock. He created entirely such new styles as a dining room credenza by setting the lower part of a breakfront on a piece made

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1968, Downs Collection, Box 26.

<sup>24</sup> The furniture was set in a paneled room and the floor was covered with an oriental carpet. The window was fitted with heavily draped curtains that lent a theatrical note to the scene. The storefront included a reproduction of a sunflower chest, Chippendale-style chairs, a pie-crust table with ball-and-claw feet, a Hepplewhite sideboard, mirrors, a drop-leaf table as well as a Sheraton shield-back chair. "Hartford Electric Light Window Display," 1927, Downs Collections, Box 29.

<sup>25</sup> The exhibition included both antiques and Margolis reproductions. The Bushnell, a newly built performance hall in downtown Hartford, was also used for exhibitions and presentations intended to boost the local economy. Margolis was the only cabinetmaker allowed to be showcased at the Bushnell and this distinction added to the firm's growing reputation, Downs Collection, Box 38.

<sup>26</sup> The newspaper review had nothing but praise for Harold's ability to produce "beautifully proportioned antiques, made exactly to one-quarter scale, turned accurately, modeled carefully, finished beautifully." "Tiny Furniture Reproductions Shown at the Children's Museum," *The Hartford Daily Times*, 22 July 1931.

<sup>27</sup> Harold left high school and returned to get his high school certificate as an adult. He was never formally trained as a cabinetmaker, but rather learned by watching. He did take drafting classes at night, a skill that he recalled "came naturally." Margolis interview, 13 October 1976.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Mrs. Ruth Rome, interview by the author, 20 September 2003.

suitable for display and storage.<sup>30</sup> As a result of his efforts at promotion and accommodation, the firm prospered from 1925 to 1950 and successfully made the transition from the Nathan Margolis shop to the Margolis shop.

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<sup>30</sup> Although it is commonly held that Nathan's workshop was superior to Harold's, Nickolas Kotula, a Margolis apprentice cabinetmaker recently disagreed. Kotula believes that Nathan was simply a better businessman than Harold who convincingly sold the concept of "quality" and exclusiveness. Unfortunately it was Harold's somewhat scattered and distracted personality that was his failing rather than his craftsmanship. Nickolas Kotula, interview by the author, 17 July 2003.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**The Colonial Revival**

Hartford was the center of the Colonial Revival at the beginning of the twentieth century. The explanation for this phenomenon lies in Connecticut's abundance of American antiques, a long tradition of cabinetmaking and furniture restoration, and a large number of prominent and wealthy (or at least comfortable) people who were interested in early furniture styles.<sup>31</sup> They included Henry W. Kent (1866-1948),<sup>32</sup> Henry Wood Erving (1851-1894),<sup>33</sup> Luke Vincent Lockwood (1872-1951),<sup>34</sup> George Dudley Seymour (1859-1945),<sup>35</sup> and Dr. Irving Whitall Lyon (1840-1896).<sup>36</sup> Together they

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<sup>31</sup> Walter Hosmer and Edwin Simons were two well known Hartford craftsmen during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. "(T)heir shop may have been the hub of that part of New England collecting universe. (Both cabinetmakers formed notable collections ... some of Hosmer's eventually found its way into the Metropolitan Museum.)" Elizabeth Stillinger, *The Antiquers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 81.

<sup>32</sup> In 1924, Henry W. Kent, although not himself a collector, was able to call on the contacts that he had made while curator at the Slater Museum in Norwich, Connecticut. Kent arranged for the most important American decorative arts collections to appear at the 1909 Hudson Fulton Celebration at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This exhibition was attended by over 300,000 visitors. The objects in this seminal exhibition subsequently became the foundation for the pieces in the Metropolitan Museum's American Wing. Kent was partly responsible for making the "collecting of American antiquities respectable." Stillinger, *Antiquers*, 129, 160.

<sup>33</sup> Henry Wood Erving was a prolific collector. His influence on other Hartford collectors was such that in 1928 Wallace Nutting dedicated his *Furniture Treasury* to Erving: "A student of furniture for fifty years whose knowledge is surpassed only by his cheerfulness in sharing it." Wallace Nutting, dedication, *Furniture Treasury* (Framingham: Old America Company, 1928).

<sup>34</sup> Lockwood was considered "the leading expert at the time on American furniture." Stillinger, *Antiquers*, 130. His two-volume, *Colonial Furniture in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1913), offers a guide to the evolution of furniture styles from the seventeenth through the early part of the nineteenth century with specific examples from New England collectors, many of whom were from the Hartford area. These Hartford collectors included Morgan G. Bulkeley and Henry W. Erving.

<sup>35</sup> Seymour was particularly interested in Connecticut's history. In 1914, he purchased the Nathan Hale Homestead in Coventry, now a museum operated by Connecticut's Antiquarian and Landmarks Society. He bequeathed his carefully annotated furniture collection to the Connecticut Historical Society. *George Dudley Seymour's Furniture Collection in the Connecticut Historical Society* (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1958).

<sup>36</sup> Lyon served as the chief medical examiner for the Hartford Life and Annuity Insurance Company and made an important contribution to Colonial Revival scholarship with the publication of *The Colonial Furniture of New England* (New York: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1891), in which he applied scientific methods of classification to the decorative arts.

inadvertently set the stage for the Margolis firm's success in selling Colonial Revival reproductions.

Many of these formidable antiquarians shared an interest in their family's ancestry, as well as a strong sense of patriotism and interest in American history.<sup>37</sup> Not surprisingly, the 1890s saw the formation of patriotic societies such as, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Sons of the American Revolution, and the Colonial Dames. Other, more specific, organizations such as the Walpole Society were on the horizon.

Hartford was the site of the first meeting of the Walpole Society that was held at the Heublein Hotel on 21 January 1910.<sup>38</sup> This exclusive group of men dedicated itself to furthering their knowledge of American decorative arts. In order to be considered for membership, gentleman interested in the field of study also had to possess the "social qualifications essential to the well-being of a group of like-minded persons."<sup>39</sup> (ill. 9)

Beginning in 1926, the Walpole Society published a series of *Note Books* to record the group's activities for the year. Each *Note Book* included papers written by members on various decorative arts topics. These volumes were published in small editions of between fifty and one hundred and fifty copies and were not circulated outside

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<sup>37</sup> For a full discussion of Hartford's nineteenth-century antiquarians see Richard Henry Saunders, "American Decorative Arts Collecting in New England, 1840-1920" (master's thesis, University of Delaware, 1973), Chapter 2.

<sup>38</sup> *The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Meeting of the Walpole Society* (Walpole Society, 1935), 1.

<sup>39</sup> Henry W. Kent, "The Walpole Society, 1910-1935: A quarter century in American collecting." *The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Meeting of the Walpole Society* (Walpole Society, 1935), 9. In the 1920s the Irish Catholic collector, Francis P. Garvan (whose important collection of five thousand American decorative arts objects was eventually donated to the Yale University Art Gallery) and "[t]he brashly successful" Mr. Henry Ford were not asked to join. Stillinger, *Antiquers*, 167.

the society. However, a body of other literature circulated widely and helped to spread the ideas of the Colonial Revival more broadly. One of the most important of these was Clarence Cook's *The House Beautiful* (1881).<sup>40</sup> Aware that an interest in old furniture was traditionally the select province of a "circle of rich, cultivated people...." Cook's stated mission was to reach a "wider circle of people who are educated, who have natural good taste, but who have not so much money as they could wish."<sup>41</sup> He assured his audience that it cost the same to decorate in good taste as in bad.

Cook encouraged his readers to furnish their homes with objects that were simple, beautiful, utilitarian, and inconspicuous. Colonial-style objects fit Cook's criteria perfectly.<sup>42</sup> He urged those readers who had not inherited furniture from "Mayflower" descendants to search the countryside for old things.<sup>43</sup> Cook was opposed to reproductions. He was equally adamant in his dislike of foreign furniture or, as he put it, "French and German miracles of ugliness."<sup>44</sup>

Most important to Cook, and to the British design reformers whose ideas he adapted for the American market, was the belief that objects could influence a person's

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<sup>40</sup> Clarence Cook's *The House Beautiful* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1881) evolved from a series of articles that Cook wrote for *Scribner's Monthly Magazine* 1875-1877. Stillinger, *Antiquers*, 58.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>42</sup> The authors Robert and Elizabeth Shackelton shared Cook's enthusiasm. "Nothing tastes [so] good as when served on old mahogany." They warned against clutter and advised that "the furniture which one is to gather should have grace or beauty or dignity, or all three." Robert and Elizabeth Shackelton, *The Quest of the Colonial* (New York: The Century Company, 1921), 49, 415.

<sup>43</sup> Cook, *House Beautiful*, 163.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

moral and social development.<sup>45</sup> Like the British design reformers, both Cook and the Walpolians valued the historic and moral narrative implicit in the furniture of the past. These collectors shared with the design reformers the belief that early vernacular furniture pieces, simply fashioned and made by honest craftsmen, were morally superior to the modern standardized machine-made objects. In addition, they believed that antiques had “spiritual merit,” a “quaintness and storytelling value” and were inherently in “good taste.”<sup>46</sup>

In her book *The House in Good Taste* (1915), Elsie de Wolfe, one of the first professional women interior decorators, delivered advice with a heavy dose of charm.<sup>47</sup> Like Cook, she emphasized the virtues of simplicity, sincerity, suitability, harmony, proportion, order, and common sense in the decoration of a home.<sup>48</sup> She admired “simple forms of furniture ....”<sup>49</sup> that were suited to their context. An advocate of colonial furniture, de Wolfe cautioned her readers, “Why should [we] American woman run after styles and periods of which we know nothing. Why should we not be content with the fundamental things?”<sup>50</sup> When period furniture was not available, she argued, reproductions were a practical choice as long as they were as close to the original as possible. “A chair honestly copied from a worm[-]eaten original is better for domestic

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<sup>45</sup> The British reformers included Henry Cole, John Ruskin, and William Morris, and, most importantly for Cook, Charles Locke Eastlake. Stillinger, *Antiquers*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Stillinger, *Antiquers*, 45.

<sup>47</sup> Elsie de Wolfe, *The House in Good Taste* (New York: The Century Co., 1920).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 9, 17.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

purposes than the original. The original, the moment its usefulness is past, belongs in a museum.”<sup>51</sup>

However, there were rules about acceptable reproductions. De Wolfe opposed factory reproductions or the pretense of age, and suggested rather that the “soft darkness of the old,” will come with time and will be there when the next generation inherits these pieces.<sup>52</sup> Margolis furniture would have been considered an acceptable choice by de Wolfe: bench-made, and not artificially distressed, the pieces were never presented as anything other than a beautifully crafted reproduction. She did not consider the historic associations of certain pieces of furniture to be of great importance, and advocated the use of Colonial-style reproductions as more than acceptable and in fact at times a preferred option to period pieces. This was a revolutionary notion. Like Clarence Cook, de Wolfe abhorred the clutter of the Victorian interior, and viewed the ardent antiquarian as a fashion victim who seems “insignificant among his collections of historical furniture.”<sup>53</sup>

The most influential proponent of the Colonial Revival, however, was Wallace Nutting (1861-1941).<sup>54</sup> Nutting, educated at Harvard and the Hartford Theological Seminary, was a congregational minister, photographer, writer, antiquarian, and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>54</sup> Nutting was apparently seen as too closely identified with the “antiques trade” and was not invited to join the Walpole Society. Information provided in the permanent display case in an exhibit, “Wallace Nutting, and the Wadsworth Atheneum,” in the Auerbach Library, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford CT, 6 June 2003-date.

connoisseur. Like Cook, he believed that the problems of a complex, newly heterogeneous modern society, with its influx of immigrants and urban problems, could benefit from reconnecting with a seemingly less complicated past.

Nutting's message was heard by a vast audience. His photographs of idealized colonial interiors taken in historic homes, depicting people in period costumes were widely circulated.<sup>55</sup> He sentimentalized and sold nostalgia. Thomas Denenberg, Curator of American Decorative Arts at the Wadsworth Atheneum, compares Nutting to today's authority on the domestic interior, Martha Stewart.<sup>56</sup> Nutting idealized the old and hated new and modern furniture which he considered "without style, without substantiality ... without any possible excuse for being," and he argued that no new furniture aesthetic could "bear comparison, side by side for a moment with the old styles."<sup>57</sup>

Nutting also amassed a collection of Pilgrim furniture pieces that he would eventually copy and sell as part of his business plan.<sup>58</sup> The collection included more than three hundred pieces of furniture and six hundred household items: chests, chairs, tables,

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<sup>55</sup> Joyce P. Barendsen, "Wallace Nutting, An American Tastemaker: The Pictures and Beyond," *Winterthur Portfolio* 18, no. 2-3 (Summer-Autumn 1983): 212.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas A. Denenberg, *Wallace Nutting: and the Invention of Old America* (New Haven: University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas A. Denenberg and Trina E. Bowman, "Wallace Nutting and the Invention of Old America," *Gallery Guide* (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 2003).

<sup>58</sup> In 1916, Nutting furthered the preservationist movement in Connecticut when he purchased the Webb House in Wethersfield, the site of a meeting between George Washington and the comte de Rochambeau in 1781. Denenberg, *Wallace Nutting*, 99-103.

cupboards, boxes, cabinets, desks, and ironwork. Of its kind, it was a collection unsurpassed in depth and breath.<sup>59</sup>

The Pilgrim furniture collection was purchased from Nutting by J. P. Morgan and donated to Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum in 1926. Hartford thus acquired the most important collection of early American furniture in the country. Henry W. Erving hailed the Nutting acquisition and applauded Hartford's interest. Erving observed that the Nutting Collection provided an unexpected boost for the city "where the new love for our ancestral treasures had its birth."<sup>60</sup>

The collection also set the standards of "taste" in the city. Wallace Putnam, writing in *The Hartford Daily Courant* in 1925, describes the furniture's virtues: "The quality that characterizes everything is a noble simplicity. It is not an art of an advanced civilization, but of a strong and vital, if rude culture.... Whenever there is carving or ornament, it is tastefully subordinated and related to the whole."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> In 1917, realizing that antiques were becoming more difficult to find, Nutting established his own high-end reproduction furniture company. He advertised his reproductions as the "Antiques of Tomorrow." Denenerg, *Wallace Nutting*, 158. (Margolis used the phrase "Antiques of the Future.") Nutting was unrestrained in his praise of Margolis reproductions. In one of several letters he writes, "[i]t is the best work in America and you deserve the highest success," Wallace Nutting to Nathan Margolis, 27 October 1922, Downs Collection, Box 28. In fact, Nutting engaged the Margolis shop to produce special orders for his customers to be reproduced in Nutting's Framingham MA factory. This is documented later by Harold Margolis in a letter to the Drexel Furniture Co., 1 August 1966, Downs Collection, Box 28. However, in 1936, Homer Eaton Keyes, founder and first editor of *Antiques* magazine praised Wallace Nutting, and not Margolis for producing the finest literal copies of early American furniture. Joyce Barendsen, "Wallace Nutting," 211-212.

<sup>60</sup> Erving remarked that there was, "envy in the minds of many" of Hartford's citizens when the Metropolitan Museum of Art's American Wing opened in 1924, and that these "priceless specimens, so much a part of New England should be so far removed from the locality that produced them." *Ibid.*, 2. The Nutting collection opened in Hartford to the public on the evening of 16 February 1925, and 1,500 people attended. *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>61</sup> Wallace B. Putnam, "Collector Spans Five Centuries," *The Hartford Daily Courant*, 15 February 1925.

The Nutting Collection was given particular prominence in 1935 during Connecticut's Tercentenary celebrations.<sup>62</sup> The Atheneum's director, Everett "Chick" Austin, Jr., assisted by Wesleyan professor Henry-Russel Hitchcock, brought the collection up from the period rooms set in a series of basement alcoves to the second floor of the museum's Avery Memorial addition. In this exhibition, titled "Three Centuries of Connecticut Furniture 1635-1935," Austin did the unthinkable: he took "the objects out of their traditional context and forced people to view them as sculpture rather than as historical artifacts."<sup>63</sup> (ill.10) Despite the iconoclastic presentation, however, many Walpolians were instrumental in putting the exhibition together.<sup>64</sup> Collecting colonial antiques took on even more glamour as the houses and parties of the "Super-Collectors" were documented in the press. The extraordinary prices paid by Henry Francis du Pont, Henry Ford and Francis Patrick Garvan at the Reifsnyder (1929) and Flayderman (1930) sales made headlines, and could only have served to further encourage others with fewer resources to join in the antiquarian spirit by purchasing Margolis reproductions.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> There were an extraordinary number of activities commemorating this milestone. They included events at historic houses around the state; celebrations by the Daughters of the American Revolution; the writing of new town histories; Nutting's *Connecticut Beautiful* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1923) book signing; the Connecticut Legislature's celebration of the "Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers at Plymouth Rock;" and the printing of a five cent stamp depicting the Connecticut Historical Society's Brewster chest. Scrapbook, "September 1934 - September 1935," Box 17, Wadsworth Atheneum Archives, Hartford CT.

<sup>63</sup> Gaddis, *Magician of the Modern*, 235.

<sup>64</sup> They included William B. Goodwin and Morgan Bulkeley Brainard who joined the Society in 1927.

<sup>65</sup> Stillinger, *Antiquers*, 200.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**Patterns of Consumption**

The archives at Winterthur contain the Margolis shop records from 1919-1976.<sup>66</sup> A separate index card for each furniture design produced by the company provides the names of the clients who purchased each style and the year of the purchase. It is thus possible to determine the names of the clients who bought specific pieces of furniture and the dates on which they did so.<sup>67</sup> The records provide answers to many questions about patterns of consumption among the Margolis clients. Did Jews and gentiles purchase different furniture styles? Were particular styles popular throughout the period under discussion here, or were there style fads? Did the demographics of the firm's client base change over time? By analyzing patterns of consumption during the firm's heyday between the 1920s and the 1950s it is possible to determine how many pieces of each style were purchased in each year, and what the ratio was of Jewish to gentile clients during each decade.<sup>68</sup>

Overall findings were based on the following eight pieces which represent styles from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> The sales records date from 1925-1971. Downs Collection, vols. 18-33.

<sup>67</sup> The furniture forms were identified by a lettering system: A (sideboard); B (bookcase on stand); C (bed); D (mirror); E (lowboy); F (tipped-top table, plant stands, fire screens); G (Hepplewhite sideboard); J(benches, wing chair); K (sofas); L (chests); M (chairs, Sheraton and Hepplewhite); N (chairs & settees); P(chairs, Queen Anne); Q (dining room tables); R (desks). Letters were followed by a specific model number. For example, M 1 1/2 would indicate an arm-chair, Downs Collection, Boxes 1-3.

<sup>68</sup> Although the number of clients purchasing each type of object can be obtained from the sales records, it is not possible to determine with absolute accuracy the precise number of Jews or gentiles who purchased them in each year. I have relied on surnames and knowledge of individual families in making the determination. Some names were not legible and others were noted only by initials and therefore were not counted.

<sup>69</sup> The furniture style names are taken directly from the Margolis purchase order records. For example "Block Front Chest" is used rather than Blockfront Chest.

(L-1) The Sunflower Chest (Appendix A, fig. 1). This uniquely American chest is identified with the cabinetmaker Peter Blin of Wethersfield (1640-1700). The Margolis copy, like the original, is made of oak with ebonized ornaments of split spindles and moldings. It is constructed with stile and rail framework containing enclosed panels. In the seventeenth century it would have been used to store clothing, linens, and bedding; in the Colonial Revival home it would have been displayed as a show piece. The purchasing records suggest that the piece was reproduced between 1926 and 1934, although two additional orders in 1944 and 1965 are recorded. The style was most popular in the 1920s (Appendix A, fig. 2). A Margolis sunflower chest is in the Wadsworth Atheneum's collection in Hartford.<sup>70</sup> During the 1920s almost twice as many gentiles as Jews purchased the Sunflower chest.

(H-3) Table with Square Top (Appendix A, fig. 3). The table is characterized by vase-and ringed-turned legs and a central stretcher, typical of the simple construction of seventeenth-century American furniture. The Margolis version of the style was most popular in the 1920s and the early 1930s (Appendix A, fig. 4). Both Jews and gentiles seem to have purchased the table in equal numbers.

H-4 Butterfly Table (Appendix A, fig. 5). The early eighteenth-century drop-leaf table with turned frames has evolved in the first half of the century into the butterfly

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<sup>70</sup> The Atheneum's Margolis sunflower chest was purchased in 2001 by Dr. Thomas A. Denenberg, the museum's Curator of American Decorative Arts. Today, original Blin sunflower chests can be found in the Hartford Steam Boiler Inspection and Insurance Company's collection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Connecticut furniture; in the Nutting Collection of Pilgrim Furniture at the Wadsworth Atheneum; and in the private collection of Shepherd Holcombe, Jr., an antiquarian whose prominent Yankee family was a client of the Margolis firm.

drop-leaf that is a uniquely American style.<sup>71</sup> The dropped leaves made such tables versatile and compact when not in use. The original (1700-1750) is part of the Nutting Collection. Fifty butterfly tables were produced by Margolis between 1926 and 1934. It seems to have been most popular in the 1920s. In 1927 alone, seventeen were ordered (Appendix A, fig. 6). This style exemplifies a sudden shift in fashion from early American country forms to the more formal styles of Chippendale, Hepplewhite, and Sheraton. After 1934 the table was no longer requested. In the 1920s and 1930s more than twice as many Jews as gentiles bought this table.

(F-13) Small Table/Candle Stand (Appendix A, fig. 7). This prototype, produced by Margolis between 1929 and 1950, was a “bread-and-butter” item for the shop.<sup>72</sup> The candle stand was reproduced thirty-three times, and was popular from the 1920s through the end of the 1930s (Appendix A, fig. 8). It could be ordered with a round, rectangular, oval or square top. The table top was designed to fold down in order to save space as needed. Charles Montgomery points out that for this style “the most important single factor in establishing the quality of the entire composition is the shape of the legs and feet.”<sup>73</sup> The Margolis table was well proportioned and graceful, qualities that must have accounted for its great popularity. Both Jews and gentiles ordered this style in equal numbers.

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<sup>71</sup> George Neumann, *Early American Antique Country Furnishings* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1984), 130.

<sup>72</sup> Margolis, lecture, 13 December 1978.

<sup>73</sup> Charles Montgomery, *American Furniture: The Federal Period* (Atglen, Pa.: Schiffler Publishing Ltd., 2001), 376.

(N-3) Chippendale Side-Chair (Appendix A, fig. 9). This Margolis mahogany side-chair, produced between 1926 and 1946 is characterized by an elongated splat with a neo-Gothic arch, ball-and-claw feet, and a slip-seat. There is low-relief carving on the crest rail and splat. The style was most popular in the 1920s and 1930s (Appendix A, fig. 10). In the 1920s three times as many gentiles as Jews ordered the chair. In the 1930s there was an increase in the number of Jewish customers for this piece, but they were still outnumbered by the gentile clients who ordered twice as many.

(L-8) Block Front Chest (Appendix A, fig. 11). This solid mahogany block front, three-drawer chest with carved shells in relief on the two outer panels, an intaglio shell in the central panel, was a successful piece for the shop. Approximately ninety-seven pieces were ordered between 1926 and 1950. The popularity of the style continued through the 1940s. Twelve pieces were ordered in 1947 and again in 1948 (Appendix A, fig. 12). In the 1920s Jews and gentiles ordered examples of this chest in equal numbers. In the 1930s and 1940s the balance shifted dramatically. Jewish clients ordered four times as many of these chests as the gentile clients.

(D-3) Chippendale Looking-Glass (Appendix A, fig. 13). This late eighteenth-century gilt and wooden frame looking glass was reproduced by Margolis between 1928 and 1950. Approximately thirty-two were made. This ornate looking-glass has a scrolled pediment top (similar to the top of a Chippendale highboy) with dependent composition gilt side garlands. The Prince of Wales plume forms the central cartouche. It is inlaid with a naturalistic floral design and scrolled lower portion with particularly prominent cut-out ears. While very popular in the 1920s and 1930s the form was most successful in

the 1940s. Jews and gentiles bought this style in equal numbers in the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1940s Jews bought the looking glass three times as often as gentiles (Appendix A, fig. 14).

(A-1) Hepplewhite Side-Board (Appendix A, fig. 15). This eight-legged sideboard was a reproduction of one at the Wadsworth Atheneum attributed to Connecticut cabinetmaker Aaron Chapin (1753-1838),<sup>74</sup> and is considered one of his masterpieces.<sup>75</sup> Forty-three sideboards of this kind were produced by the firm between 1926 and 1946. It took a master craftsman to recreate the movement formed by the recessed central section and to execute with delicacy the elliptical flute inlays and panels outlined in satinwood. This style was most popular during the 1920s (Appendix A, fig. 16). Twice as many Jews bought the sideboard as gentiles. In the 1930s the two groups bought in equal numbers. In the 1940s the only documented customers were Jews.

From an analysis of this data it is possible to make the following observations: In the 1920s and 1930s, Jews and gentiles patronized the firm in almost equal numbers. For example, the Hepplewhite sideboard was purchased in the 1920s by the Garvans, the Rockefellers, and the Whitneys, as well as by such high-profile Jewish families as the Auerbachs, the Kohns, the Suismans, the Haases, and the Schatzes.

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<sup>74</sup> Eight-legged sideboards were more costly than six-legged models. Chapin trained in Philadelphia and brought that city's particular construction techniques and sophisticated styling back to Connecticut, where he adapted them to the pared down "Yankee" aesthetic.

<sup>75</sup> When Rabbi Morris Silverman briefly summarized the life and achievements of Nathan Margolis, he mentioned the Hepplewhite sideboard. Rabbi Morris Silverman, *Hartford Jews 1659-1970* (Hartford: The Connecticut Historical Society, 1970), 222.

The sunflower chest was a special exception. In the 1920s a disproportionate number of gentiles ordered this style. The gentile collector would probably have found this style particularly desirable. The original might well have been owned by an ancestor. Acquiring the Margolis reproduction could help the owner reaffirm a sense of patriotism and connectedness to America's past. Jewish clients of Margolis, on the other hand, had no family connections to the country's earliest citizens. The few Jewish families who purchased the sunflower chest were ardent furniture collectors, like the Hartford attorney Julius B. Schatz.

Other findings might at first seem to contradict the notion that only gentiles favored furnishings closely associated with the America's colonial past. Both Jews and gentiles purchased the table with square top (H-3), and the butterfly table (H-4), both late seventeenth-and early eighteenth-century styles. However, neither of these tables had the same unique association with early American life as the sunflower chest. Whereas the tables were essentially functional pieces of furniture, the sunflower chest was viewed on another level. It was both useful and a vanity piece for its owner who could lay claim to owning a unique early American design. It is noteworthy that the Sudarsky family, identified as early trendsetters in the Jewish community, purchased both the butterfly table (H-4) and the table with square top (H-3) in 1927.<sup>76</sup> This might well account for the number of Jewish families interested in this early style.

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<sup>76</sup> For a full discussion of the Sudarsky family, see pages 37-39..

During the 1920s and 1930s, at the height of the Colonial Revival movement, when the antiquarian spirit was strongest, seventeenth-and early-eighteenth-century styles of furniture were most popular. After the 1930s, as Margolis shop sales records indicate, these early styles with historic associations had lost their appeal.<sup>77</sup>

The reason for the disproportionate number of gentiles who ordered the Chippendale side-chair can perhaps be understood anecdotally through the experience of the Bulkeley family.<sup>78</sup> The Bulkeley's Margolis dining-room chairs, handed down from Peter's mother, a noted collector during the early 1920s, were purchased to "fill in" around her antique dining-room table. In the 1940s, when Jewish families began to order dining-room sets from Margolis, the Hepplewhite and Sheraton styles were more popular.<sup>79</sup>

During this decade, a dramatic shift occurred in the demographics of the Margolis clientele.<sup>80</sup> At this time virtually all of the firm's clients were Jewish. The few gentile

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<sup>77</sup> The diminishing interest in the earlier furniture styles during the 1940s was confirmed by Dr. Thomas Denenberg, Curator of American Decorative Arts, Wadsworth Atheneum, in discussion with the author, 11 December 2003.

<sup>78</sup> Peter and Valerie Bulkeley, interview by the author, 28 October 2003. The Bulkeley family settled in Connecticut in 1660 and began collecting American antiques in the early 1900s.

<sup>79</sup> Dr. Thomas Denenberg, discussion, 11 December 2003.

<sup>80</sup> The Sack family, including the legendary antique dealer Israel Sack, had nineteen transactions with Margolis, between 1926 and 1947; the Sudarskys, had seventeen transactions with the firm between 1926 and 1950; the Blumenthals, had seven transactions between 1927 and 1946 with the firm; the Schatzes, had thirty transactions between 1928 and 1947 with the firm; and the Glotzers had thirteen transactions between 1928 and 1948 with the firm. In the 1930s and 1940s they were joined by newly prosperous Jewish immigrant families, Downs Collection, Boxes 1-3.

clients were generally from families whose antiquarian interests continued as they rounded out their antique collections with Margolis reproductions.<sup>81</sup>

A prime example of the sudden predominance of the Jewish clients during the 1940s can be seen in a case study of the Margolis block front chest. The chest was an impressive object, with its shell carving. The leading Jewish families, the Auerbachs, the Joseloffs, the Schatzes, and the Suismans, all ordered this piece. These families represented prosperity, refinement, gentility and “good taste” in the community. The appeal of the chest to other Jewish clients most probably reflected their desire to demonstrate their ability to own the same furniture as the leading Jewish families. It had more to do with social status than an immediate identification with the object’s historic or cultural associations.

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<sup>81</sup> In the 1940s, the gentile clients included the Brainards, the Cheneys, the Fullers, the Hepburns (the family of actress Katherine Hepburn), the Wildes, the Bissels, the Barbours, and the Bulkeleyes, Downs Collection, vols. 18-33.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **The Gentile Clients**

As early as the 1920s Hartford, was the capital of the world's insurance industry. The corporate headquarters of, Aetna Life and Casualty, Connecticut General, Connecticut Mutual, the Hartford Steam Boiler Inspection and Insurance Company, the Hartford Fire Insurance Company, Phoenix Mutual, and Travelers created an abundance of prosperous and prominent business executives, industrialists and bankers who were part of a cautious and conservative culture that helped to create the image of Connecticut in general and Hartford in particular as "the land of steady habits."<sup>82</sup> Virtually all of these captains of industry were gentiles who bolstered their business and social contacts through memberships in organizations that included the Canoe Club, the Hartford Club, the Hartford Golf Club, and the University Club. They served on the boards of directors of publicly traded companies as well as the boards of trustees of the region's major cultural institutions such as the Bushnell Memorial, the New Britain Museum of Art, and the Wadsworth Atheneum. Many of these captains of industry were Margolis clients.<sup>83</sup>

The Cheney family, highly successful silk-mill industrialists from Manchester, Connecticut, did business with Margolis from 1926 to 1939 in sixteen separate transactions. During these decades Henry W. Kent, Henry Wood Erving, and Luke Vincent Lockwood, founding members of the Walpole Society, all were Margolis clients. However, it was Morgan Bulkeley Brainard who had the greatest impact on the Margolis firm, and who proved to be its most important gentile connection.

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<sup>82</sup> For a discussion of Hartford as the insurance capital see Eugene R. Gaddis, *Magician of the Modern*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 76-77.

<sup>83</sup> Additional high profile gentile clients from out of state included the Rockefellers and Pierre du Pont, III.

Morgan “Max” Bulkeley Brainard was an Episcopalian born to a prominent Hartford family. He was educated at Yale and later became a collector and antiquarian. In 1922, he was named president of Aetna Life Insurance Co. In 1931 he ordered Margolis reproductions of important historical furniture pieces for Aetna’s Hartford corporate offices. The commission included copies of two settees originally made for Washington’s Inaugural (1789) and a John Hancock mahogany chair (1776) that was used at the signing of the Declaration of Independence.<sup>84</sup> The Margolis versions of this furniture were placed very prominently in the lobby and outside the offices of the directors.

Morgan Brainard began his dealings with the Margolis firm in 1911.<sup>85</sup> In a letter to Harold Margolis dated 13 October 1961, he wrote “[i]t was at least fifty years ago when I became acquainted with your father and have never forgotten a demonstration he gave me on how furniture should be made.”<sup>86</sup> Brainard also praised the Margolis firm in a letter to Colonial Williamsburg written on 23 April 1931. “Their work [Margolis] has more than a local reputation, and I believe it is generally admitted that no other organization reproduces antique furniture more faithfully or with a higher standard of

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<sup>84</sup> Other pieces included a John Adams mahogany desk (1795), a reproduction of the one used by Adams when he served as Washington’s vice president, and a reproduction of a John Adams desk chair (1795). Other pieces including several sideboard tables in both the Chippendale and Hepplewhite styles and American ladderback chairs. They were carefully interspersed with Brainard’s own considerable collection of antiques. In a letter of solicitation, Harold describes work done for Aetna’s corporate offices. Harold Margolis to Mr. John W. Bond 17 September 1971, Downs Collection, Box 28. Information about the present location of the original pieces was not contained in the correspondence.

<sup>85</sup> The Brainard family had nineteen separate transactions with Margolis between 1928 and 1950, Downs Collection, Boxes 1-3.

<sup>86</sup> Morgan Brainard to Harold Margolis, 13 October 1961, Downs Collection, Box 28.

workmanship than they do.”<sup>87</sup> Brainard’s personal support of the firm and Aetna’s prestigious commissions served as an important endorsement from one of the city’s pre-eminent gentile citizens.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Morgan Brainard to Mr. Harold Calick, 28 April 1931, Downs Collection, Box 28.

<sup>88</sup> Charles Brainard, interview by the author, 14 February 2003. Mr. Brainard recalled how he was taken to the Margolis shop by his uncles Morgan “Max” and Max’s brother Newton Brainard. He explained that his uncle “Max” bought Margolis furniture to supplement his antiques collection, and to be given as gifts to family members, particularly at Christmas. Morgan Brainard, Charles relates, wanted future generations to have objects like his own period pieces but obtained at modest prices. The Brainard family placed a high value on furniture. Charles recalls that when he celebrated his eleventh birthday he was given his first “big person’s gift,” an antique mirror. He could barely conceal his disappointment, for he would have much preferred a pair of skis.

**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**The Jewish Clients**

Two waves of Jewish immigrants came to Hartford in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In the 1830s and 1840s, Jews came from Central Europe, in particular Germany, and became successful merchants and shopkeepers fully involved in the community. This was an educated group that quickly became acculturated in its adopted city.<sup>89</sup> Upon arrival they were cordially admitted to “fraternal brotherhoods,” that included the Royal Arcanum, the Beethoven Lodge, the Odd Fellows, and the Masons. As David Dalin points out, these associations were a way for Jews to get to know the gentile political and economic elites in the city.<sup>90</sup>

Although interactions between Jews and gentiles were cordial, Jews still experienced restrictive barriers in real estate and were barred from executive positions in the banking and insurance industries until well after World War II.<sup>91</sup> Nonetheless, a photograph taken at the German-Jewish Touro Club in 1910 of the Washington’s Birthday Children’s Celebration, vividly suggests the desire of Hartford’s prosperous Jews to become Americanized (ill.12).<sup>92</sup> This picture is startlingly similar to one taken for *The Hartford Courant*, February 20, 1921, of the “Hartford Society Folk in Dress and Character of Colonial Days [A]t Historical Party ....” (ill.13)

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<sup>89</sup> David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susan Heschel, eds., *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), xxi.

<sup>90</sup> David D. Dalin, *Jews of Hartford*, (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1997), 25.

<sup>91</sup> The Hartford insurance and banking companies that practiced exclusionary policies included Hartford Bank, Phoenix Insurance Company, the Hartford Fire Insurance Company, and the Aetna Insurance Company. Dalin, *Jews of Hartford*, 174.

<sup>92</sup> The Touro Club became Tumble Brook Country Club in 1924.

Between the 1880s and 1924 there was a second wave of Jewish immigration to the United States, the result of a series of pogroms that radically altered the quality of life for Jews in Russia.<sup>93</sup> These Eastern European immigrants were less educated, and more orthodox in their religious practices than their predecessors, and were much more insular.<sup>94</sup> In Hartford, as in New York and large cities like Baltimore, a great distinction existed between the Westernized, educated German Jews and this new wave of Orthodox, traditional Jews from Poland, Russia, Lithuania, and Rumania.

The great divide between German and Eastern European Jews eventually narrowed. In his book *Hartford Jews 1659-1970*, Rabbi Morris Silverman points out that by the 1920s, as the “newcomers” learned to speak and write English, and gained education and prosperity, the distinctions between the groups began to blur.<sup>95</sup> The new immigrants looked to the more established Jewish families, both German and Eastern European, with whom they socialized, as icons of respectability and assimilation rather than to the gentile world.

Andrew Heinze writes that for Jews “consumption was central to American

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<sup>93</sup> In 1880, there were approximately 800 Jews in Hartford, more than 90% of whom were of German origin. By 1890, the Jewish population was 1,158 and by 1900 about 2,000 with an increasing number from Eastern Europe. By 1910, in a total population of almost 99,000, approximately 6,500 Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe had settled in Hartford, outnumbering the German-Jewish population by five to one. Dalin, *Jews of Hartford*, 48.

<sup>94</sup> Stephen Birmingham writes similarly about class distinctions, status and assimilation within the New York Jewish community in his book *Our Crowd: The Great Families of New York* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). Stephen Birmingham was born in Hartford in 1930.

<sup>95</sup> Although German Jews originally associated almost exclusively with one another, the divide with Russian Jews was successfully breached in time as Jews from different backgrounds worked side by side as early as 1913 in the combined Jewish Charities that later became the Hartford Jewish Federation. In the 1920s, Tumble Brook Country Club opened its membership to all Jews. Silverman, *Hartford Jews*, 37, 39.

acculturation.” One of the signs of acculturation was not only the ability to afford objects knowing which ones to buy. Heinze reasons that since only the wealthy can buy such items as custom-made furniture, the consumer achieves social status through his buying power.<sup>96</sup> The ownership of an expensive object was a way for a person to differentiate himself from those who could only afford mass-produced goods.<sup>97</sup> Margolis custom-made furniture was considered a purchase that only families with considerable income or savings could afford.

The story of Nathan Zwillinger and his wife Sally, as well as the Suisman and Sudarsky families, affords an unusual insight into the relationship between Margolis furniture and the Jewish families of Hartford. Sally Zwillinger (1890-1986), wife of Nathan Zwillinger, a printer of modest means, came to Hartford in 1913 from Russia as a girl of thirteen. Although she never learned to drive, she gradually lost her accent and

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<sup>96</sup> Andrew Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 4. Heinze theorizes that Judaism had always exalted special and highly prized ceremonial objects for religious ceremonies. Jewish immigrants “thrived on the use of luxuries in celebrating the Sabbath and other holidays. Delicious meals, fine garments, and choice tableware all contributed to the transformation of the household.” In time luxurious objects were used on a daily basis. The result was “the banality of luxury,” and thus “[t]he appreciation of luxuries would help to establish Jewish identity in the new world as it had in the old.” Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance*, 53-6. Gentiles were not, of course, exempt from the desire for luxury and status. Lynn Dumenhil notes that George F. Babbitt, the main character in Sinclair Lewis’ 1922 novel *Babbitt*, achieves a “sense of identity and well-being,” from material objects. Lynn Dumenhil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995), 77, 85. Lewis dedicates his novel to Edith Wharton. Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1922).

<sup>97</sup> Marx’s theory about value and hand produced objects is summarized by Andrew Heinze. “Marx felt that the value of products derived essentially from the labor invested in their production. In the marketplace, however, these objects acquired a “mystical character” they came to be seen not as the reflection of human labor but as valuable in themselves....” Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance*, 17. Sociologist Thorstein Veblen finds a certain irony in the cult of the hand-made object. He reasons that these objects are marked by a certain crudeness and waste, therefore their costliness is really a result of the “exaltation of the defective” by the Arts and Crafts Movement and others. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1899), 161-162.

could pass as a native-born American.<sup>98</sup> Determined to furnish her home with the prestigious hand-crafted furniture made by Nathan Margolis, she chose to sit on wooden crates while she waited and saved.<sup>99</sup> Their family's Margolis furniture eventually included twin beds, bureaus, a highboy, a dining-room table and chairs, and a side board.

Part of Sally Zwillinger's campaign to become Americanized involved buying into the consumer culture that was defined for her in Hartford by the assimilated Jewish families. The Zwillingers were members of Temple Beth Israel, the synagogue of the town's prosperous German families. It probably would not have escaped Sally's notice that the Margolis firm was responsible for the carvings of the wooden lions and Ten Commandments, as well as, the chairs in the temple's main sanctuary (ills.14-15).<sup>100</sup>

In discussions and interviews with members of Hartford's Jewish families, such as the Neiditzes, the Elbaums, the Tragers and the Youmans, the name repeated most often as one of the respected leaders of the Jewish community was the Edward Suisman family. Edward and his brother Samuel took over their father's scrap-metal business in 1921. The business became internationally successful and survived as a family business

<sup>98</sup> Sally Zwillinger's family remembers her as a proud woman who "would never settle for second best." Joan Finger, Sally Zwillinger's granddaughter, interview by the author, 7 July 2003.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> In 1936 the firm received a prestigious and highly visible commission from Temple Beth Israel. Isadore Wise, president of the congregation and one of Hartford's most prosperous merchants, was a Margolis client. When the temple relocated, the Margolis firm was assigned the important task of providing carvings and furniture for the main sanctuary. The Beth Israel commission publicly confirmed the esteem in which the firm was held in the Jewish community. "New Temple Distinctive Architecture," *The Hartford Daily Courant*, 16 September 1936.

through the next generation until it was sold around 1998. The family was always public-spirited and set an important community standard as philanthropists.<sup>101</sup>

Mrs. Edward (Etta) Suisman,<sup>102</sup> who recently celebrated her ninety-sixth birthday, vividly recalls that “Margolis was known as a wonderful craftsman, and all Jewish people who could afford his furniture and knew its value owned it.” She acknowledged that Margolis was a Hartford phenomenon and that people “from outside” didn’t know about Margolis. “If you owned it you knew that you had something special. It was costly but not so that you couldn’t afford it. People who couldn’t afford Margolis would buy Fineberg, but it wasn’t in the same ‘class’ as Margolis.”<sup>103</sup> Mrs. Suisman acquired all of her Margolis furniture when she was first married in 1927.

Mrs. Suisman denies, however, that she was a stylesetter in this respect and gives that distinction to her sister-in law Minerva, known as “Mim.” Edward Suisman’s sister Minerva married (ca.1920) John Sudarsky, a vice president at the *Hartford Courant*. John was prominent in the business community and very involved in both Jewish and non-Jewish philanthropic ventures. But it was Mim, according to Etta who was “very bright,” and a stylesetter for all matters aesthetic.

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<sup>101</sup> Michael Suisman, *Edward A. Suisman: On the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, (privately published, 1982). The book illustrates the family’s journey from Gorsd, Lithuania (then part of Russia) to Edward Suisman’s education at New England preparatory schools, his honorary degrees, his Tumble Brook Country Club wedding to Etta, his ownership of a stately Colonial Revival home on Ledyard Road in West Hartford, yachting with insurance millionaire E. Clayton Gengras, his selection as the first Jew on the board of Hartford Hospital, and an honorary award from the Hartford Jewish Federation.

<sup>102</sup> Etta Suisman, interview by the author, 10 July 2003.

<sup>103</sup> Abraham Fineberg, a Russian immigrant cabinetmaker, came to Hartford in 1929 at the age of 16, after a brief apprenticeship in London. He worked for the Wineck brothers, Nathan Margolis’ cousins, and in 1932 set up his own shop with his son Israel and began to produce reproduction Colonial Revival furniture.

Although newly prosperous families looked to the Suismans, the Suismans, according to Etta Suisman, looked to the Sudarskys, who were unusually assimilated into the gentile community. Etta Suisman was surprised to learn in an interview with this writer, that over the years, gentile families also acquired Margolis furniture.<sup>104</sup> In general, despite some contact through non-profit organizations, Hartford's Jewish and gentile families lived separate lives.<sup>105</sup> The Sudarskys were an exception to this rule.<sup>106</sup>

The Sudarskys owned many beautiful pieces of Margolis furniture.<sup>107</sup> Mim's son Michael recalls that "mother's home was full of drama, it had a special glow, and anyone who came into the house admired the furniture. She had an understated ease, elegance

*Margolis and Fineberg Auction* [auction catalog] (Windsor, CT: Nadeau's Auction Gallery, 1989), 4.

<sup>104</sup> The lack of social interaction between the gentile and Jewish communities is confirmed by Elaine T. Lowengard. Mrs. Lowengard's father, Melvin Title, was president of Tumble Brook Country Club (1936-1937, 1943-1964). She now lives in the house that belonged to her grandparents on Prospect Avenue, furnished with many inherited pieces of Margolis furniture. She was surprised to learn that prominent gentile families bought Margolis furniture. Mrs. Lowengard acknowledged that she had never heard of the Walpole Society. Elaine Lowengard, interview by the author, 24 October 2003. Merle Trager's recollections are instructive as well. Benjamin Singer, Mrs. Trager's father, started Beacon Light Co., a very successful wholesale lighting firm and he was also a founding member of Tumble Brook Country Club. He became a customer of the Margolis firm in the 1940s. Among other things, Mrs. Trager's mother owned a Margolis bedroom and diningroom set. Mrs. Trager suggests that it was her mother's socially prominent Jewish friends, including the Suismans and the Sudarskys, and not the gentile community who set the standard for the Singers. Merle Trager, interview by the author, 4 August 2003.

<sup>105</sup> This was not an isolated phenomenon. In America in general "Jews pursued suburban leisure and recreation activities almost exclusively with other Jews." Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, eds., *Jewish Women in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2: 1355. In *The Right People*, Stephen Birmingham devotes a chapter to "The Company Town: West Hartford, Conn. 06107." Although written in 1968, it describes an outgrowth of a pattern that began much earlier. Birmingham observed that the local citizen in West Hartford had a particularly strong sense of one's place in the social hierarchy, and demonstrated a marked conformity in both the Colonial Revival architecture and the Colonial Revival interiors of their homes. Stephen Birmingham, *The Right People: A Portrait of the American Social Establishment* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), 212-213.

<sup>106</sup> The Sudarskys also immigrated from Janova. Michael Sudarsky, interview, by the author, 19 July 2003.

<sup>107</sup> Michael Sudarsky's mahogany Chippendale tilt-top table with pie-crust edge molding is copied from the original in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and is illustrated in Wallace Nutting's *Furniture Treasury*, 1928, no. 1118.

and grace like Katherine Hepburn.”<sup>108</sup> Minerva was involved in charities; she was a “mover and doer of her day,” and was considered very avant-garde in her artistic tastes.<sup>109</sup> His parents, Michael notes, were involved with gentile friends and German Jews, “more than with other Russian Jews.”<sup>110</sup> However, Minerva never sacrificed her identification with the Jewish community.

The Zwillingers were probably influenced by such prominent Jewish families as the Suismans, and the Suismans were influenced in turn by the trendsetting, assimilated Sudarskys. However, Jews who purchased Margolis furniture were also motivated by the firm’s reputation as the “best.” Owning “Margolis” became an indication of a person’s ability to purchase custom-made furniture that was endorsed by the community’s social arbiters of “good taste.” In Hartford, implicit in this notion of “tastefulness” was a certain “Yankee” reserve, a lack of overt showiness or display.

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<sup>108</sup> Katherine Hepburn was born to a Hartford family that bought Margolis furniture. Michael Sudarsky, interview by the author, 19 July 2003. Lois Green, Mim Sudarsky’s niece (Lois Green’s mother Adeline Bishop and Mim Sudarsky were sisters), who now lives in Holden MA confirmed that Mim lived in a beautiful home, had a love for old furniture and “knew fine things.” She also noted that her mother and her sisters all shared the same decorating style. It was, she thought, her grandmother Sarah, Etta’s mother-in-law, who started the fashion for buying the “Margolis” that was owned by the German-Jewish families like the Auerbachs that she admired. Lois Green, interview by the author, 12 December 2003.

<sup>109</sup> Minerva purchased the work of contemporary conceptual artist Sol Lewitt when he was an art student in New Britain. Sudarsky, interview, 19 July 2003.

<sup>110</sup> “Mim” Sudarsky’s upbringing was unusual for a Jewish woman. She was sent to boarding school in New Jersey at the Convent of the Holy Angels in 1914. Her family had intended to send her to boarding school in Switzerland, but World War I prevented them from doing so. Despite the ease with which the Sudarskys seemed to travel in the gentile world, and Mim’s unusual schooling, she comfortably identified with her Jewish heritage. Michael recalls that a small wooden carving of a Russian-Jewish peasant woman holding the Bible was always displayed in his mother’s living room. Sudarsky, interview, 19 July 2003. In the birthday book, immigrant relatives are prominently featured. Michael Sudarsky, “Minerva Sudarsky: Minerva’s Seventieth Year, Surprise Celebration” (privately printed, 1969). Edward Suisman’s commemorative birthday book follows a similar format, however the Suisman book was privately published and distributed to libraries and other institutions in the area.

Margolis furniture pieces represented both status symbols and restrained showpieces. The craftsmanship inherent in their carving and inlaid work and the quality of the woods distinguished the furniture, and therefore its owners, as people of superior taste, style, and judgment.

Ferne Youmans,<sup>111</sup> whose husband's family owned the very successful Connecticut Spring Company, recalled how her mother-in-law, who was especially known for her stylish good taste, recoiled when she first laid eyes on the newlyweds' apartment. After viewing the contemporary furniture, factory-made with a bright gold tone finish, the elder Mrs. Youmans shouted, "I can't believe that a son of mine could live surrounded by such vulgar things." David Barquist has observed that the concept of taste is represented on "the dividing line between the cultivated and the vulgar,"<sup>112</sup> and "the culture of consumption was making it possible for the twentieth-century American to jump several rungs in the social ladder in a single generation."<sup>113</sup> Mrs. Youmans most likely cried out in fear for her own social standing.

During the 1940s there was a dramatic shift in the firm's clientele; orders now came almost exclusively from Jewish families. The fervor for Margolis gained momentum and swept through the Jewish community during this decade, and created a situation that

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<sup>111</sup> Ferne Youmans, interview by the author, 3 August 2003.

<sup>112</sup> David L. Barquist, "The Honours of a Court or the Severity of Virtue: Household Furnishings and Cultural Aspirations in Philadelphia," in *Shaping A National Culture: The Philadelphia Experience, 1750-1800*, ed., Catherine Hutchins (Winterthur: Winterthur Museum, 1994), 17.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

can be likened to a “social epidemic.”<sup>114</sup> Even though the desire for Colonial Revival furniture seems to have faded in the gentile community after 1940, the Jewish community’s allegiance to the firm continued unabated for another ten years.

In 1945, a significant commission came from Hartford’s most prominent German-Jewish entrepreneur, Beatrice Fox Auerbach, president and owner of the department store G. Fox & Co., founded in Hartford in 1847 by her father Gerson Fox.<sup>115</sup> When Mrs. Auerbach was asked to refurbish the interior of the newly appropriated Connecticut Governor’s Residence, a Georgian Revival home at 990 Prospect Avenue, she chose the custom work by the Margolis shop for this prestigious assignment (ill. 16).<sup>116</sup>

There is, however, one example of a passionate gentile collector of Margolis furniture in the 1940s. Margaret Thompson Johnston, wife of Russel Z. Johnston, the

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<sup>114</sup> Malcolm Gladwell uses the analogy of a viral epidemic to explain the spread of ideas in his book *The Tipping Point* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000).

<sup>115</sup> G. Fox & Co., “became Connecticut’s leading department store and the largest independently owned department store in the country,” until it was sold in 1965 to the May Company. Silverman, *Hartford Jews*, 78.

<sup>116</sup> Before 1945, Connecticut’s governors lived in their own homes. The commissioned pieces included reproductions of a mahogany Duncan Phyfe double pedestal dining room table, twenty Chippendale dining room chairs, a pair of claw-foot hall benches, a pair of Hepplewhite plant stands, a mahogany two-drawer drop-leaf Duncan Phyfe table with claw-feet, an additional pair of Chippendale chairs for the upstairs hallway copied from chairs in the Metropolitan Museum, two crotch mahogany Hepplewhite console tables with satinwood and ebony inlay, and two Hepplewhite mirrors with gilt side drops. Harold Margolis was particularly proud of the special permission he was granted to copy from the originals in museums. The dining room chairs in the Governor’s Residence were copied from antiques in the Francis P. Garvan collection at the Yale University Art Gallery by the Philadelphia craftsman James Gillingham. Harold described them as “ornately and beautifully carved with acanthus carved hips and carved water leaf drops in the rear.” In order to keep the cost of the chair down, Harold modified the ball-and-claw feet and substituted simple fluted legs in its place. Margolis, interview, 13 December 1978. The console tables were copies from originals in the Reifsnnyder Collection in Philadelphia. Information about the Governor’s Residence commission was obtained from “Docent Note Book: Connecticut Governor’s Residence” (unpublished handbook, 1991), compiled by the author during her tenure as Executive Director of the Governor’s Residence 1990-1995. Governor Lowell P. Weicker, Jr. initiated the renovation of the residence in 1990. All

judge of Hartford's Probate Court, acquired more than twenty-three pieces of "Margolis" in 1942. Mrs. Johnston's motivation for owning Margolis stand in stark contrast, however, to those of Jewish families buying at the same time. In 1967 she described each of her furniture treasures in precise detail in a handwritten, thirty-nine page journal entitled "Margaret Thompson Johnston's Tambour Desk." The design source of each piece of furniture is carefully noted and she records with pride the fact that Harold Margolis used as models "authentic American antiques, those of the Puritans, those of the American Revolution, and of the Federal Period" in his work.<sup>117</sup>

It is unlikely that a Jewish client would have kept such a journal. For the Jewish immigrant, owning a Margolis reproduction represented a path to gentility and respectability; for the gentile client it symbolized a romanticized American past.

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of the Margolis furniture was incorporated into the redecoration.

<sup>117</sup> Margaret Johnston, "Margaret Johnston's Tambour Desk," (unpublished journal, 1967), Downs Collection, Box 27. Her Margolis furniture included an acorn four-poster bed, Chippendale mirrors with side drops, upholstered chairs, a dressing table, a blockfront chest of drawers, an octagonal table, a night stand and a Tambour desk copied from a design by John Seymour of Boston dating to ca. 1800. A tambour desk is distinguished by its "upright reeded or slatted shutters" that slide and are used to conceal small drawers and pigeonholes. Montgomery, *American Furniture*, 218.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **The Final Years**

After World War II, new stylistic trends emerged. In some cases Colonial Revival interiors were replaced by Modernist designs and furnishings. Dramatic social and technological changes also had a significant impact on the custom-made furniture business. First, the long apprenticeship of the trades was no longer appealing to young men seeking a livelihood.<sup>118</sup> Second, advances in machine technology enabled manufacturers to streamline furniture production and make goods at lower cost. Firms like Beacon Hill, that used simple dowel rather than dovetail construction, made Colonial Revival reproduction furniture in great quantity during this period, and it was readily available in such Hartford department stores as G. Fox & Co., Brown Thompson & Co., and Sage Allen. Other bench-made craftsmen, such as Abraham Fineberg, began to take advantage of the shortcuts.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Margolis noted that during World War II, the government sponsored a cabinetmakers apprenticeship program. However, he found that "no one was willing to stick out the necessary four or five years," and the turnover was too high. (One year he had a turnover of thirteen young men.) Meribel Levis, "Cabinet Maker Furnishes Evolutionary Exhibit," *The Hartford Courant*, 19 June 1976, 22.

<sup>119</sup> Harold claims that Fineberg's extraordinary output could be attributed to his use of shortcuts that ultimately affected the quality of his work. For example, he used sheets of inlay that were pasted directly onto the furniture like a veneer. Margolis craftsmen, on the other hand, continued the slower painstaking process of setting the inlays individually. Harold Margolis, interview, 13 October 1976.

In the 1950s, Harold was forced to diversify his business.<sup>120</sup> He began to sell high-fidelity cabinets and equipment.<sup>121</sup> The sign outside the High Street shop during this period advertised the firm's two distinct directions. "Fine Furniture Designed, Reproduced and Restored" and "Audio, Video Outstanding High Fidelity Systems, Components, Custom Cabinetry, Professional Equipment."<sup>122</sup> (ill.17) He set up a complicated listening system composed of speaker, amplifiers, and turntables in the shop (ill.18)<sup>123</sup> and made custom cabinets to house the equipment (ill.19).<sup>124</sup> In 1953 "more than half of [Harold's] income came from hi-fi."<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Although the nature of the business had changed dramatically, two prestigious commissions were completed during this period thanks to the initiatives of Newton Case Brainard, Morgan Brainard's brother. In 1960, the firm helped restore the Senate Chamber in Hartford's Old State House on behalf of the Connecticut Historical Society. Newton Brainard, president of the Society, provided the funds as a memorial to the Brainard and Bulkeley families. He asked Margolis to restore the existing twelve arm-chairs and four window settees originally made by Lemuel Adams and Samuel Kneeland of Hartford in 1796, and to reproduce the Senate desk, a mahogany semi-circular table, an oval mahogany table, a secretary's table, two clerk's tables of cherry wood, ten chairs, and six settees for the Senate Chamber. "Restored Old State House Is Open to Public Today." *The Hartford Courant*, 3 January 1961. Nathan Margolis had restored the Senate Chamber chairs in 1901. "Cabinet Maker Dead," *The Hartford Courant*, 9 February 1925. In 1976, in honor of the nation's Bicentennial, Harold was asked to curate an exhibition (even after the shop closed) planned for the Old State House on behalf of the Aetna Life & Casualty Insurance Co., "The Evolution of Furniture Craftsmanship in America, 1640-1840." *Antiques and the Arts Weekly*, 16 July 1976. It was his last assignment.

<sup>121</sup> Ironically, Harold's father Nathan was also involved in making custom radio cabinets early in his career. "He is believed to have been the first maker of a cabinet for a radio, fashioning a lowboy that enclosed a radio set, long before the radio cabinets came on the market." "Cabinet Maker Dead," 9 February 1925.

<sup>122</sup> Downs Collection, vol. 41.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> His advertisements in the 1950s reflected the change: "Fine Handmade Reproduction Furniture, Designed, Reproduced & Restored and High Fidelity Music Systems and Components," "Connecticut's Finest Sound Listening Studio," Downs Collection, vol. 34.

<sup>125</sup> Evans Clinchy, "Harold D. Margolis Takes A Look at High-Fidelity Field," *The Hartford Times*, date unknown, Downs Collection, Box 26.

Between 1925 and 1950, the firm's most productive years, Harold employed up to twenty-five craftsmen, a carver, and fifteen cabinetmakers, wood turners, and finishers.<sup>126</sup> In 1945 the firm was so busy, that there was an eighteen-month backlog on some of the orders.<sup>127</sup> During the final years, he had only one man or two men working with him and was forced to send his carving to be done in New York.<sup>128</sup>

In 1968 Harold tried desperately to find a business plan that would salvage the company and engaged in a whirlwind letter-writing campaign. On 22 November 1966, for example, he suggested to Charles F. Montgomery, Winterthur's Senior Research Fellow, that the Margolis firm be given the right to reproduce and market Winterthur's collection of American furniture in the same way that Kittinger was reproducing Colonial Williamsburg pieces.<sup>129</sup> His ideas, although not without merit, were never realized. Harold was ultimately more of a dreamer than a businessman, and was unable to find a partner to execute his grand plans.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Most of the workmen in the early years were immigrants who had worked with Nathan in Janova. For a short time, the firm did its own upholstery work but Harold found that customers were indecisive about their color and fabric choices. As a result, he finished his chairs and sofas in muslin. Harold Margolis, interview, 13 October 1976.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Harold wrote "My shop has dwindled to 4 old timers all over 65...." Harold Margolis to Mr. David J. Brumm, President of Drexel Furniture Company, Drexel, North Carolina, 6 August 1966, Downs Collection, Box 28.

<sup>129</sup> Harold Margolis to Charles Montgomery, 22 November 1966, Downs Collection, Box. 28.

<sup>130</sup> In 1976, he attempted to import both kits and fully assembled pieces of "fine quality rosewood furniture" from China. He called on Charles F. Hummel, the curator at Winterthur, to write a letter in support of his application for a visa to the People's Republic of China. Harold Margolis to Charles Hummel, 13 May 1976, Downs Collection, Box 28.

Finally, in 1974 Harold was forced to close the shop. After unsuccessfully approaching several museums in Connecticut, he arranged to sell the shop's contents and records to the Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum in Winterthur, Delaware, for the sum of \$12,500. During his remaining years he continued to consult and write articles.<sup>131</sup> He died on January 14, 1984 at the age of seventy-eight.<sup>132</sup> Between 1894 and 1976, the Margolis shop produced more than 7,000 pieces of custom-made furniture. When the shop closed, for most Hartford citizens, the fashion for Colonial Revival furniture had ended.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> For example, see Harold Margolis, "'New Antiques'" Are Worth Keeping," *Reading Eagle*, 16 November 1978.

<sup>132</sup> Obituary of "Harold D. Margolis," *The Hartford Courant*, 16 January 1984.

<sup>133</sup> The only period during which Margolis furniture decreased in value was during the Depression. At this time, several of the styles were reduced in price. In 1934, the Hepplewhite sideboard (A-1) was selling for \$600 and was only \$500 in 1936, Downs Collection, vols. 20-21.

## **CONCLUSION**

Nathan Margolis, a Russian immigrant cabinetmaker, arrived in Hartford in 1894, where he joined other cabinetmakers in a city that was receptive to his craft. Hartford was soon to become the center of the Colonial Revival in America. The city's antiquarian spirit was based on a long local tradition of cabinetmaking, a disproportionate number of collectors of early American furniture, including members of the Walpole Society, and the ready availability of American antiques. The donation in 1925 of the Wallace Nutting Collection of Pilgrim furniture to the Wadsworth Atheneum provided the city with an encyclopedic group of Colonial objects and encouraged local interest in the style. As a result, many local citizens chose to furnish their homes with antiques or more affordable reproductions of objects associated with America's past.

In this study I have examined Margolis' Jewish and gentile clients. Through research at Winterthur Library's Margolis archives, I have been able to determine consumer demand for eight distinctly different furniture styles of Margolis furniture, ranging from a seventeenth-century sunflower chest to an eighteenth-century Hepplewhite sideboard during the firm's heyday from the 1920s through the 1950s. In particular, I have examined the different buying patterns of both gentile and Jewish clients for each of these styles. Through a series of interviews with Hartford families who own Margolis furniture, I have also been able to analyze the similarities and differences between the Jewish and gentile clients' apparent motivation for owning "Margolis." The Jewish experience proved to have been somewhat complicated. Careful investigation has

shown that German and Russian Jews aspired to ownership of Margolis reproductions for different reasons.

In Hartford, Margolis furniture reflected the aspirations of individuals in both the Jewish and gentile communities. Although both groups coveted “Margolis,” their reasons for wanting to own Colonial Revival reproductions differed. My research has led to the following observations: For the gentile client “Margolis” represented the traditional virtues of the past. For the Jewish client “Margolis” represented a guarantee of gentility in the present.

One of the ways the city’s prominent gentile citizens demonstrated an interest in the Colonial past was by collecting American antiques. For some, Colonial objects provided a link with their Puritan forefathers, while for others it was a way to establish a connection with a past that had taken on mythic proportions. These simple, functional, handcrafted objects served, for these citizens, as reminders of a life before what some of them saw as the intrusion of disparate ethnic groups and the complexities of the modern world.

The Margolis firm provided seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Colonial Revival reproductions replete with the historic associations that proved to be a compelling attraction for gentile clients who were now interested in reasserting their roots. When antiques were unavailable or too expensive, Margolis furniture was a way for these client to “fill in” gaps in their collections, or, as often happened, to give the furniture as wedding gifts or to grandchildren.

The reputation of the Margolis firm was such that these reproductions were prized in themselves. One of the most prominent members of the gentile community, and a role model for many, Morgan Brainard, president of the Aetna Life Insurance Co., was an early and loyal supporter of the firm. His personal orders and influence in arranging for the firm's public commissions carried much weight with his social peers.

In Hartford, Jewish immigrant clients seem to have been drawn to "Margolis" for different reasons. The first wave of German Jews that arrived in the city in the mid-nineteenth century wanted to assume the manners and lifestyle of the dominant gentile culture. Margolis furniture became objects of assimilation for such German-Jewish families as the Auerbachs. Even though they sought to emulate their gentile neighbors' interest in antique-style furniture, the historic narrative of Colonial Revival objects was less important to the German-Jews than the fact that they reflected the tasteful, traditional style of the city's prominent citizens.

The Eastern European Jewish immigrants who arrived in the later part of the nineteenth century made up the majority of the Margolis clients in the 1940s. My research suggests that this wave of immigrants, eager to assimilate, did not look directly to the gentile community for guidance, but rather to the prosperous Jewish families from both Germany and Eastern Europe that had come before them. As a result, the newly arrived families, when their circumstances permitted, began to emulate the gracious lifestyles of such families as the Edward Suismans and the John Sudarskys who had preceded them. For these newly prosperous families, as some of their descendants have observed, an accepted formula for creating a tasteful home was to acquire furniture from

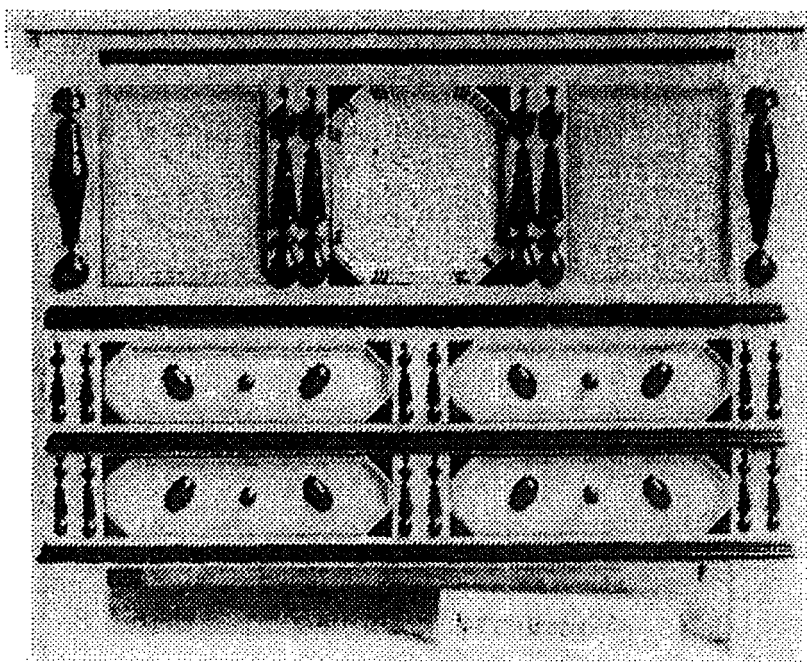
Margolis, “the best” cabinetmaker, endorsed by the city’s most admirable Jewish citizens. In the 1940s, the Jewish taste for “Margolis” reached almost feverish proportions.

In contrast, my analysis of the firm’s records indicates that by 1940 all but the most stalwart gentile clients had lost interest in Margolis. A combination of factors seems to have heralded the decline. They included the lack of talented immigrant labor schooled in the traditional techniques of reproduction that were so prized, along with a shifting aesthetic that looked to modern rather than traditional design as a symbol of status. So strong was the “Margolis” myth among Jewish clients that despite these changes they remained virtually the firm’s only clients through the 1950s, after which many of them were also swept up in the Modern movement. Despite Harold’s best efforts Margolis to respond to the times by selling high-fidelity equipment and custom-made stereo cabinets the shop closed its doors in 1974.

This study has made clear that within the Jewish and gentile communities Margolis furniture resonated with a different narrative myth. For the gentile client Margolis furniture linked the owner symbolically to a romanticized past. For the Jewish client, it provided a visible sign of assimilation into a tasteful and gracious lifestyle exemplified by Hartford’s prosperous Jewish trendsetters. Within the Jewish community the badge of privilege worn by those who owned Margolis furniture was so strong that despite the decline in interest in Colonial Revival furniture after World War II, Jews continued to acquire Margolis furniture when all but the most loyal gentiles looked elsewhere to furnish their homes.

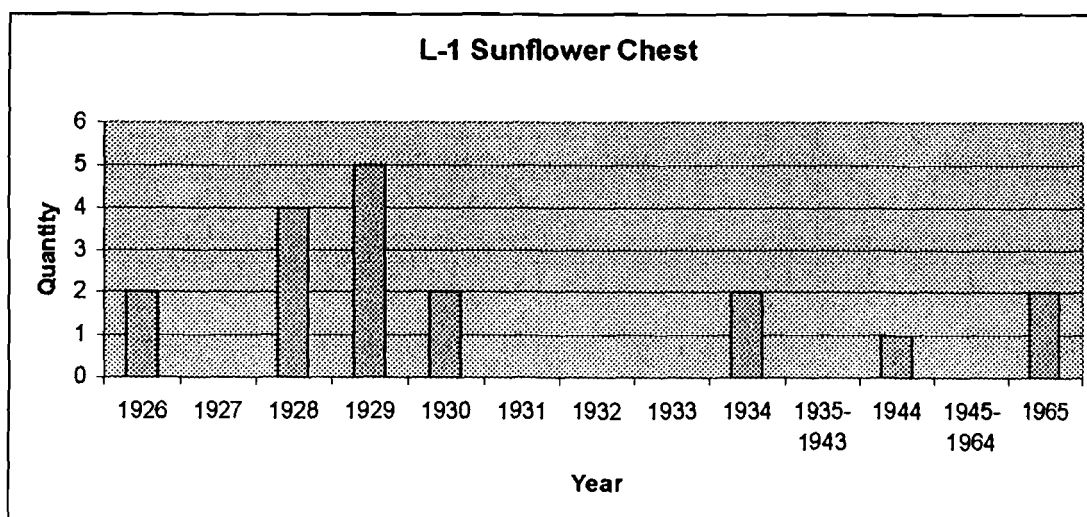
## **APPENDIX A**

### **Eight Margolis Furniture Styles and Their Corresponding Purchase Order Graphs**



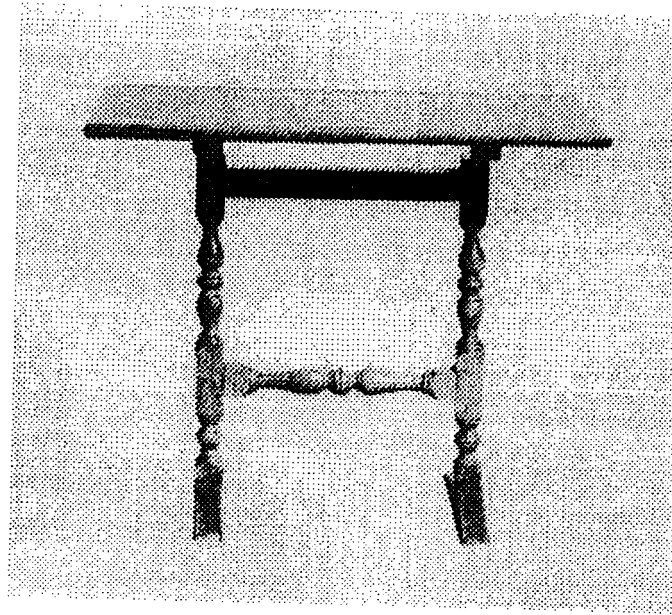
**Fig. 1. L-1 Sunflower Chest**

Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera,  
Col. 95, vol. 34.



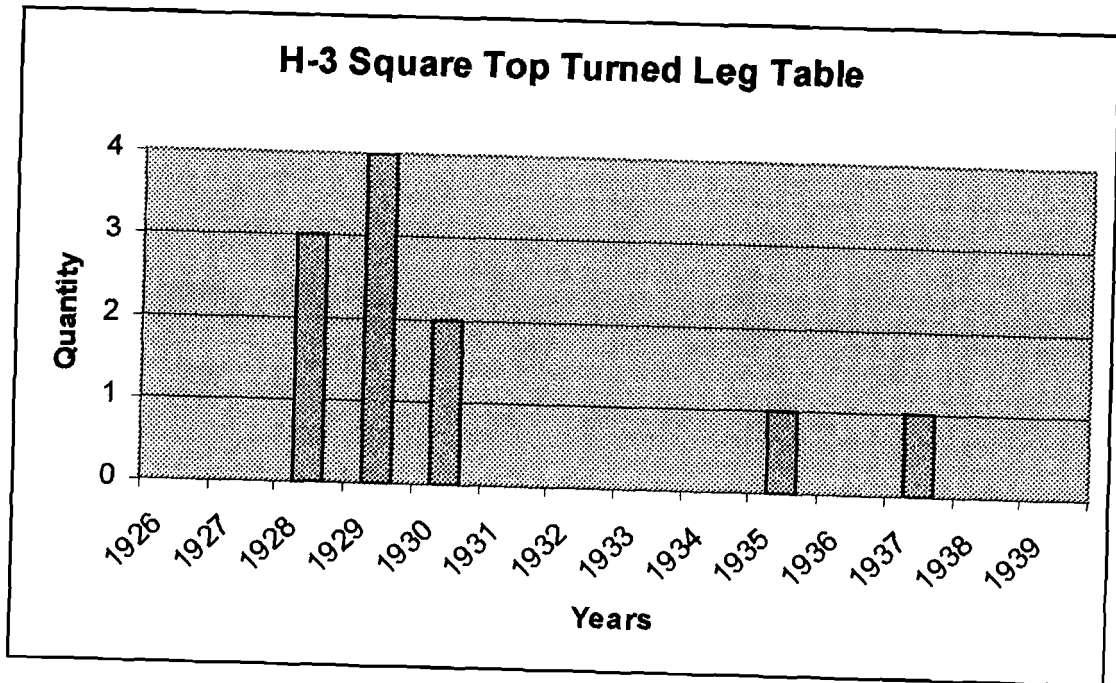
**Fig.**

## 2. Sunflower Chest Purchase Orders

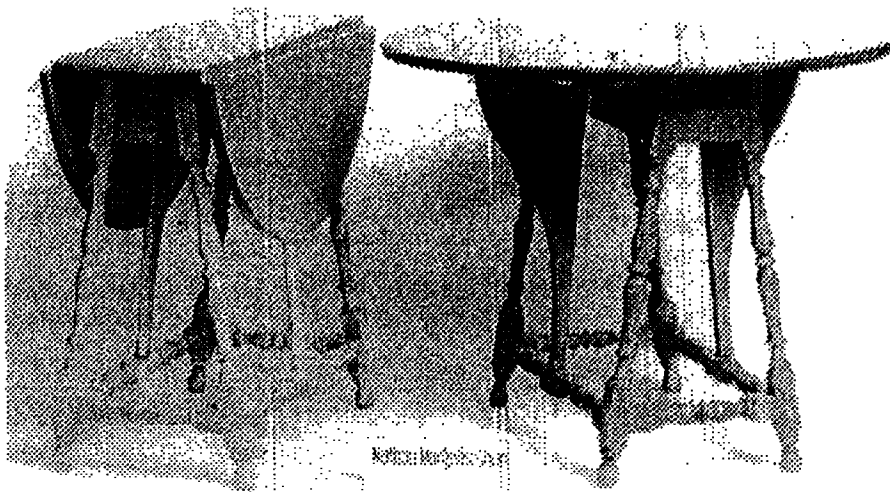


**Fig. 3. H-3 Square Top Turned Leg Table**

Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera,  
Col. 95, vol. 34.

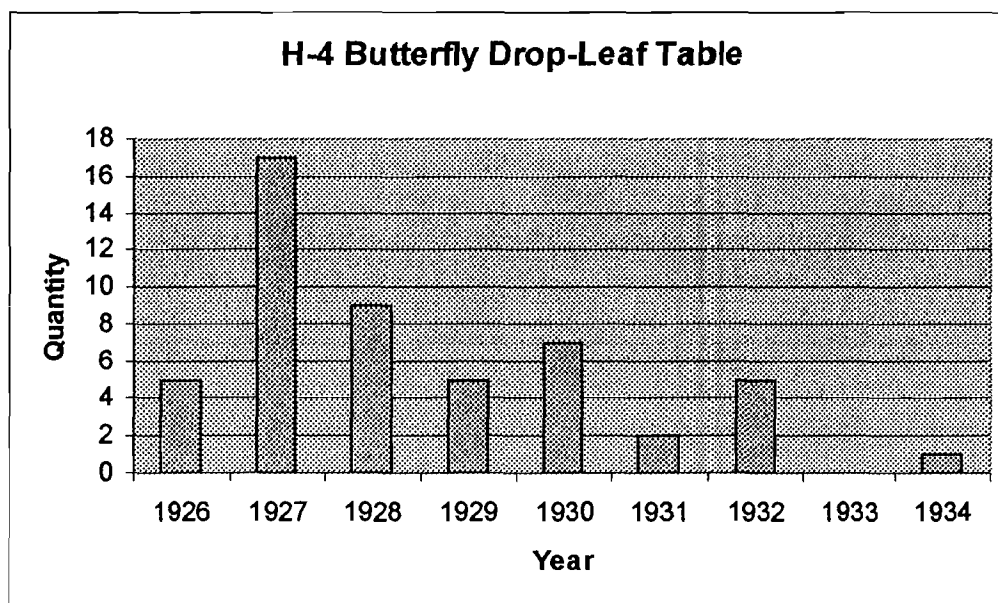


**Fig. 4. Square Top Turned Leg Table Purchase Orders**

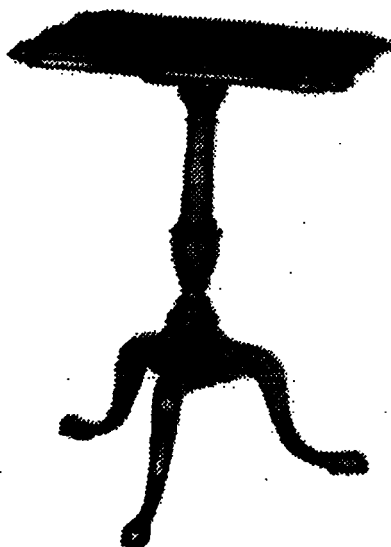


**Fig. 5 - H-4 Butterfly Drop-Leaf Table**

Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera,  
Col. 95, vol. 34.

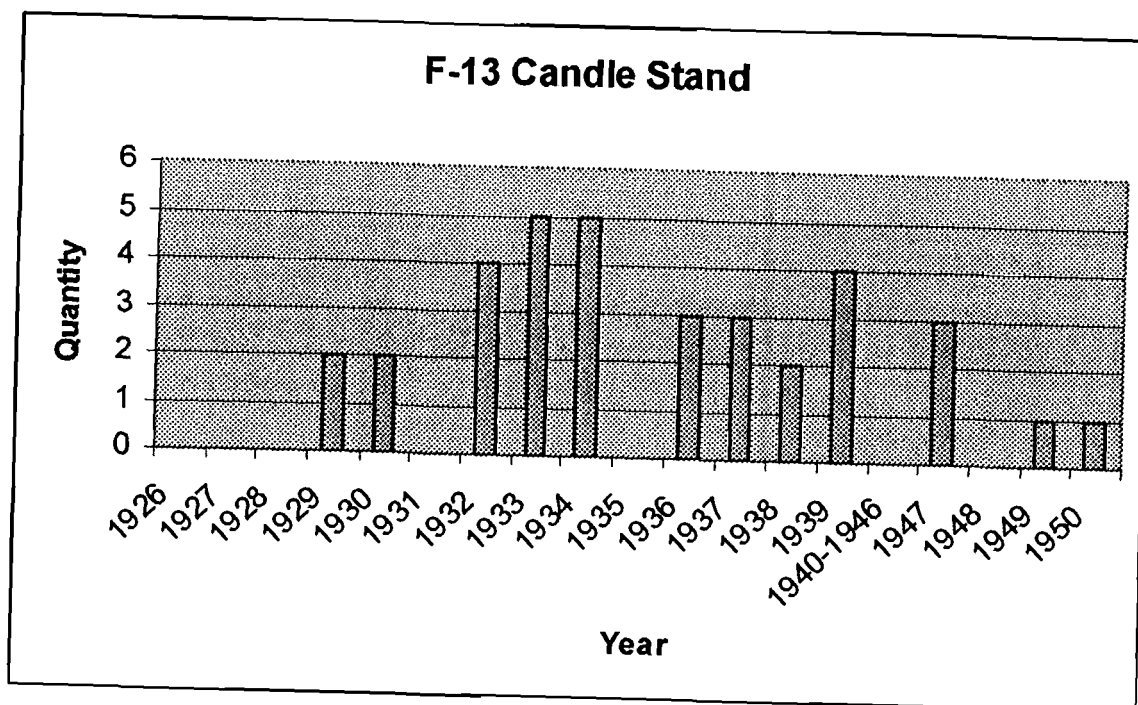


**Fig. 6. H-4 Butterfly Drop-Leaf Table Purchase Orders**

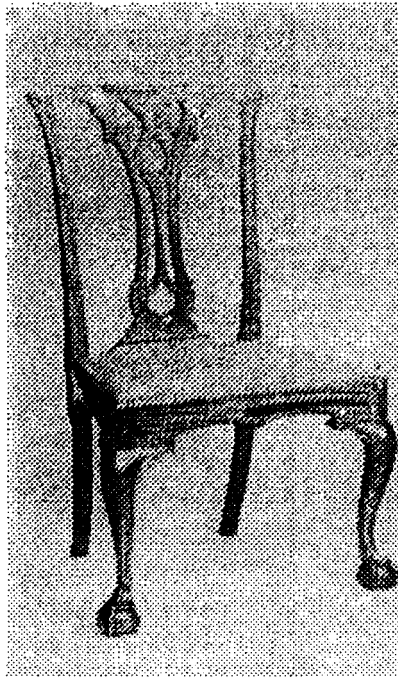


**Fig. 7. F-13 Candle Stand**

Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera,  
Col. 95, vol. 34.

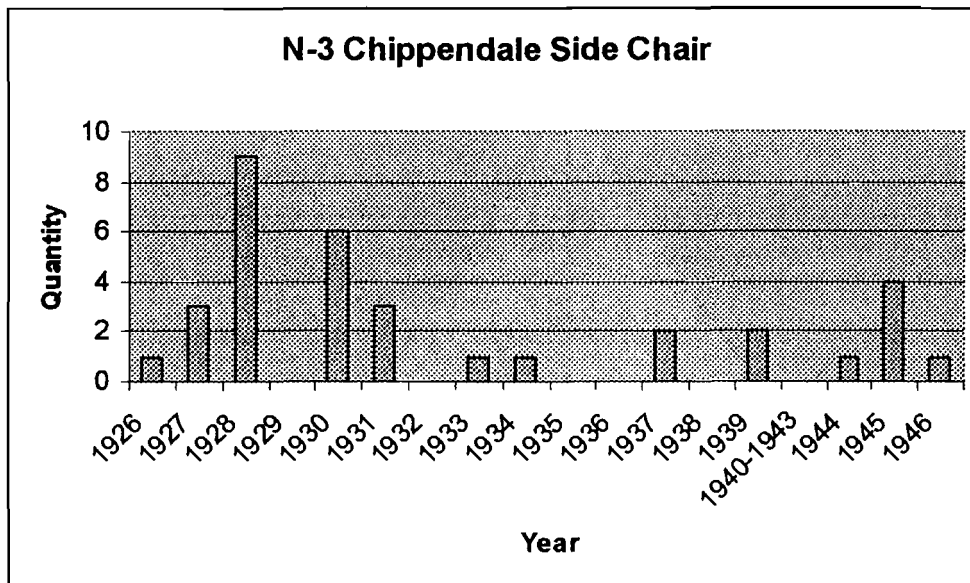


**Fig. 8. F-13 Candle Stand Purchase Orders**



**Fig. 9. N-3 Chippendale Side-Chair**

Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Col. 95, vol. 34.

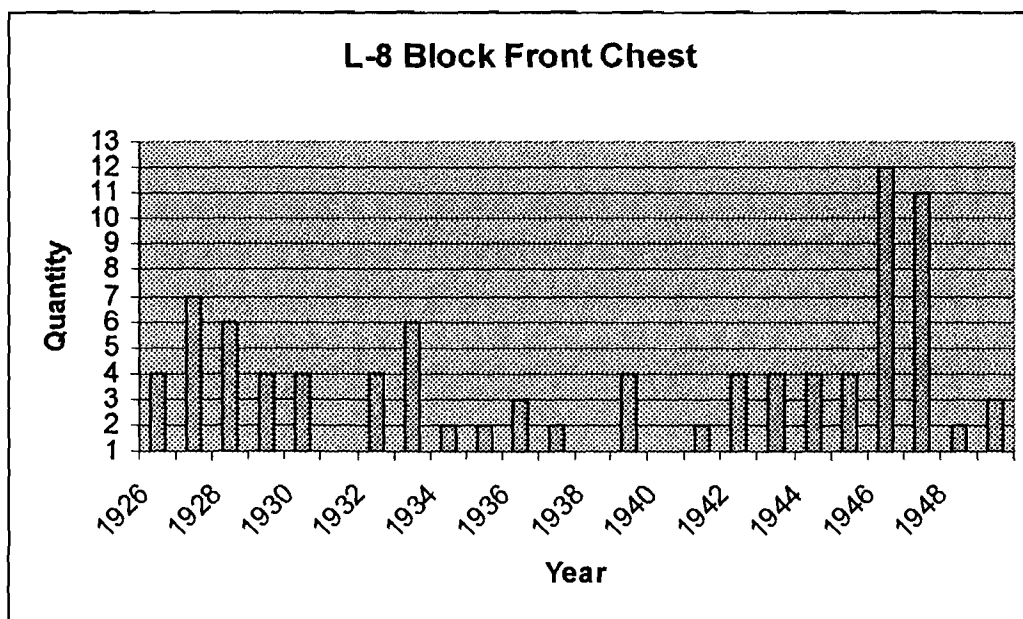


**Fig. 10. N-3 Chippendale Side-Chair Purchase Orders**



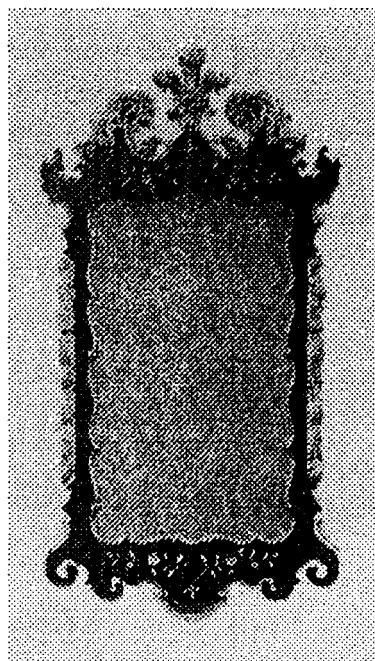
**Fig. 11. L-8 Block Front Chest**

Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera,  
Col. 95, vol.



34.

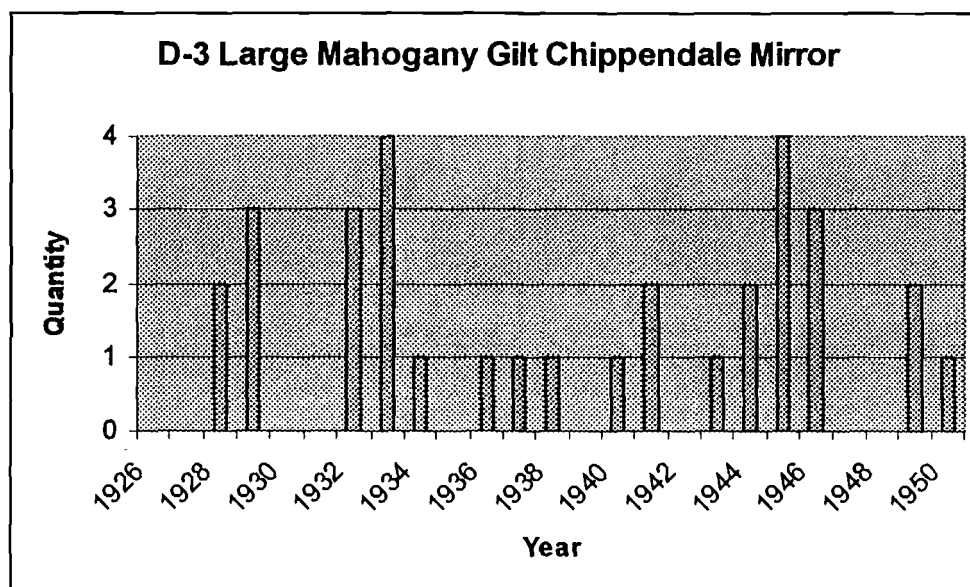
**Fig. 12. L-8 Block Front Chest Purchase Orders**



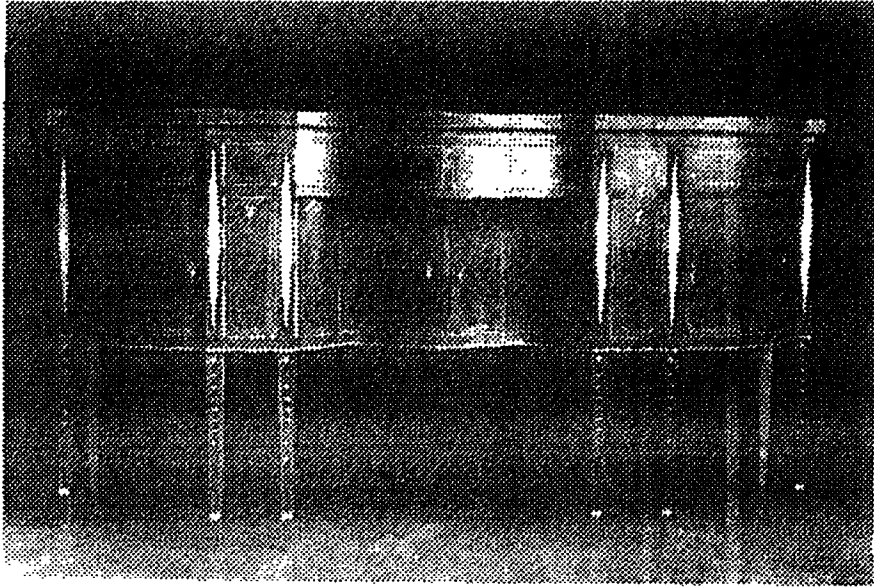
**Fig. 13. D-3 Large Mahogany Gilt Chippendale Mirror**

Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera,

Col. 95, vol. 34

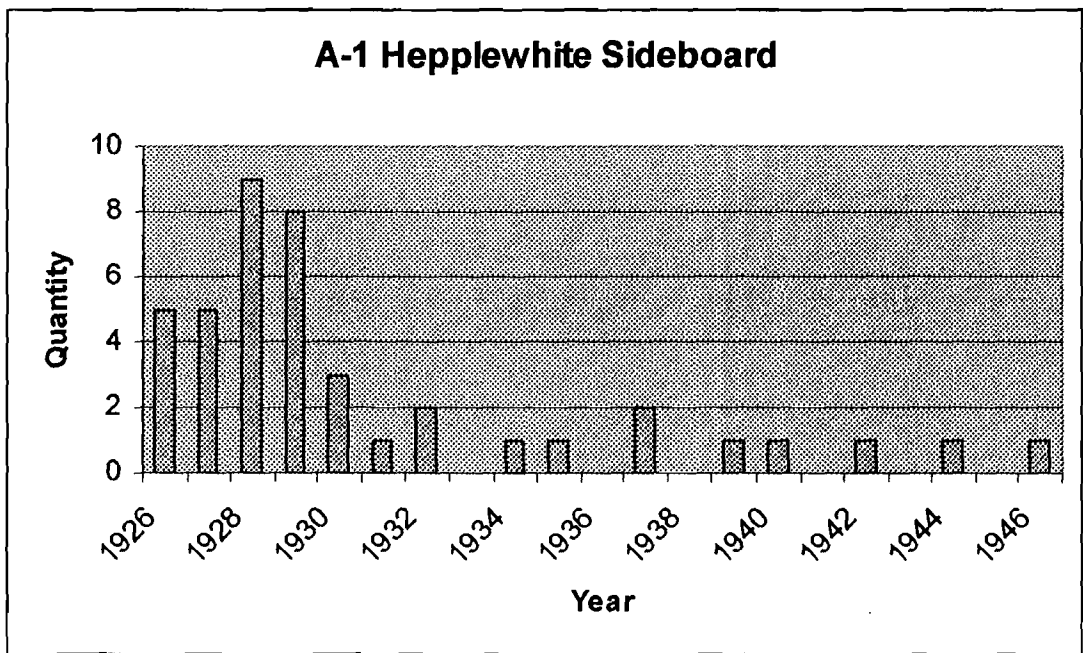


**Fig. 14. D-3 Large Mahogany Gilt Chippendale Mirror Purchase Orders**



**Fig. 15. A-1 Hepplewhite Sideboard**

Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera,  
Col. 95, vol. 34.



**Fig. 16. A-1 Hepplewhite Sideboard Purchase Orders**

## **APPENDIX B**

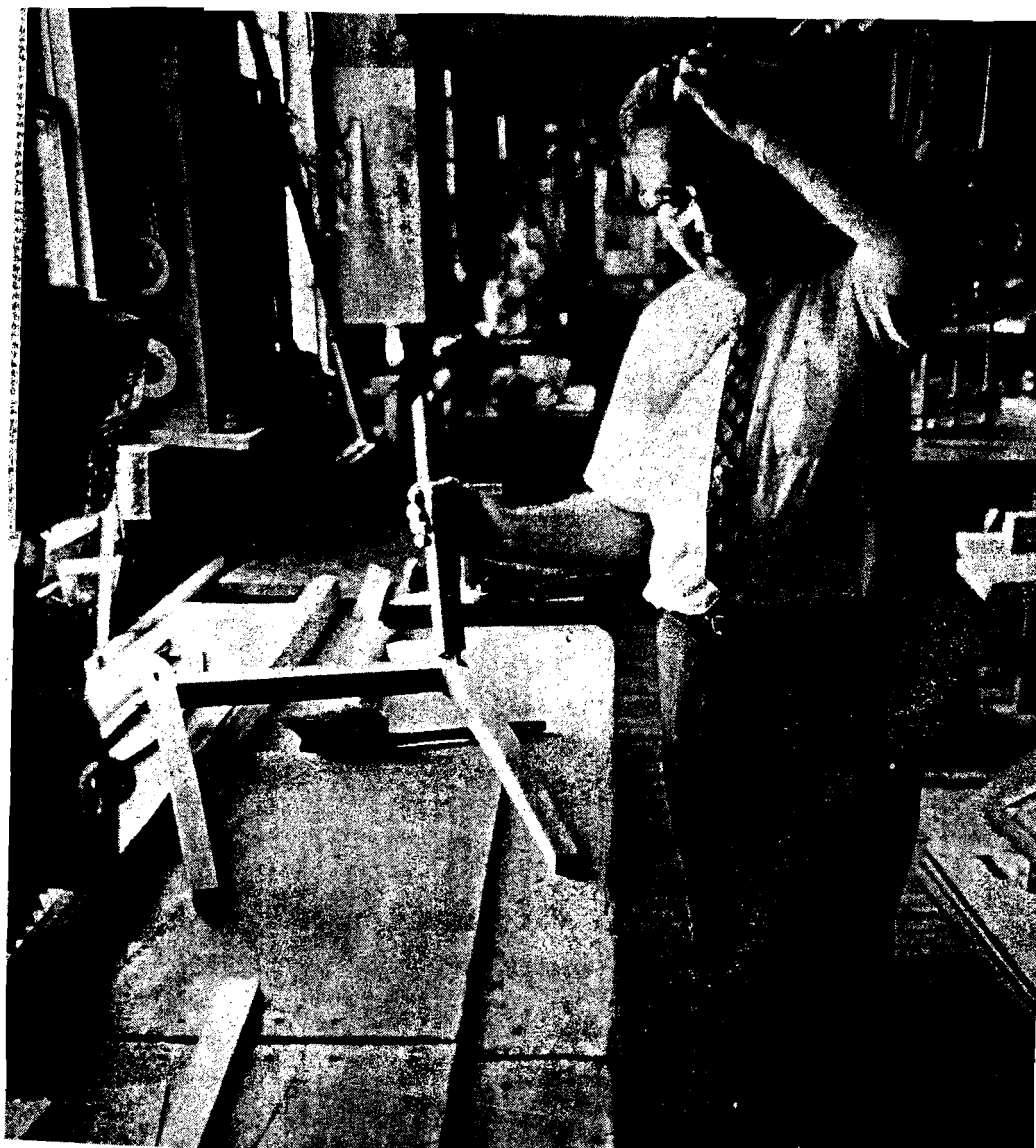
### **Illustrations**



**ILL. 1. Photograph of Nathan Margolis from "Nationally Known Cabinet Maker Dead,"**  
*The Hartford Daily Courant*, 9 February 1925.



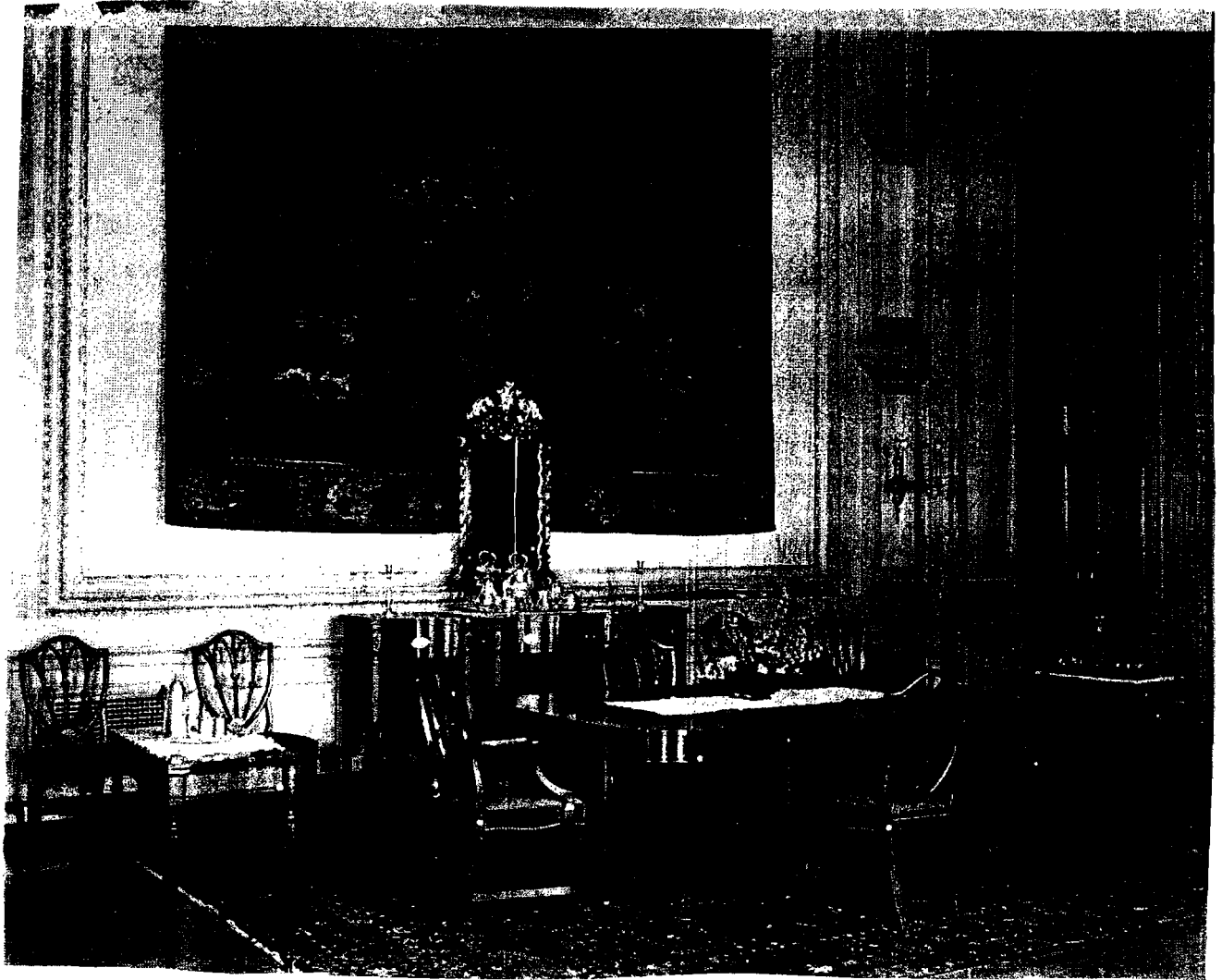
**ILL. 2. Nathan Margolis shop ca. 1920, from David G. Dalin, *Making A Life Building A Community* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1997) [insert unpaginated].**



**ILL. 3. Harold Margolis in his High Street shop, 1 July 1968.  
Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts & Printed  
Ephemera, Col. 95, Box 27.**



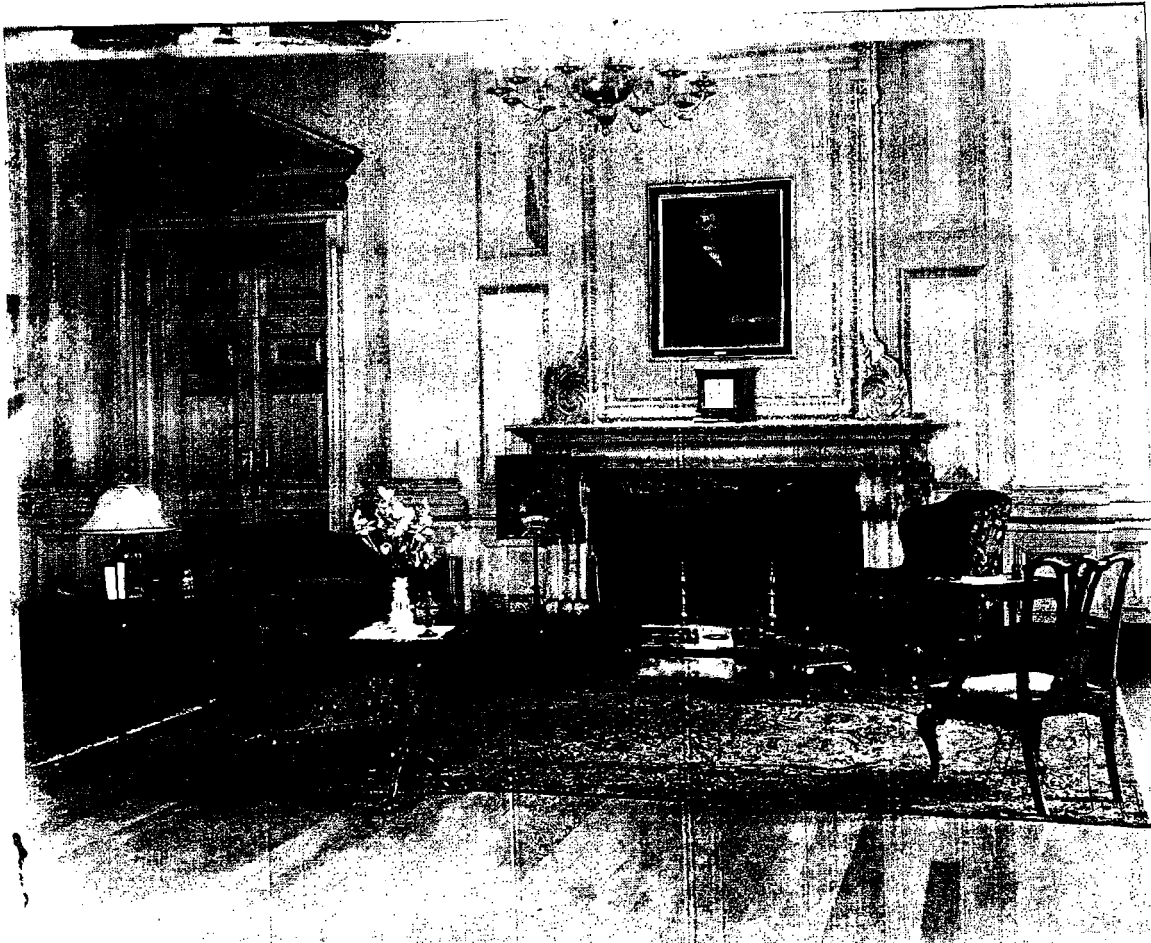
**ILL. 4. Nathan Margolis Shop display in the window of the Hartford Electric Light Co., 1927. Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts & Printed Ephemera, Col. 95, Box 29.**



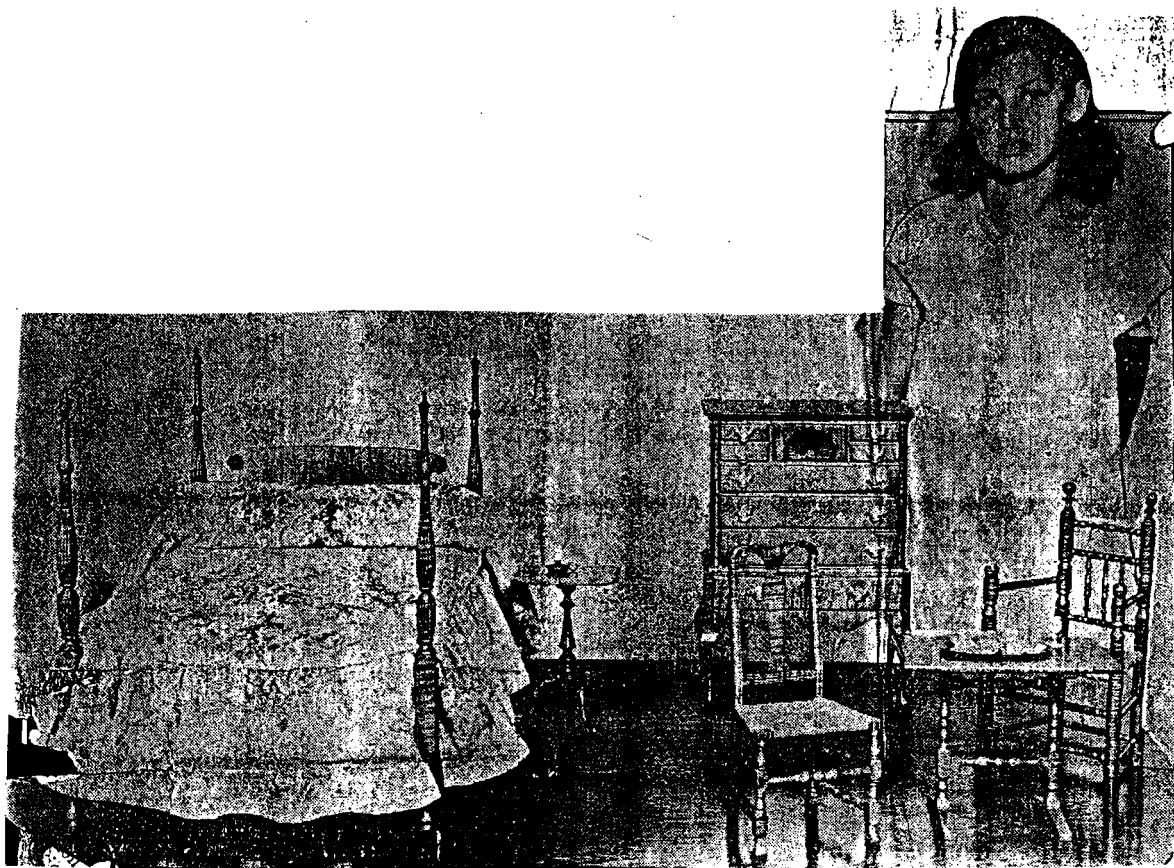
**ILL. 5. The Dining Room. Nathan Margolis Shop Exhibition of Authentic Handmade Reproductions in the Colonial Room of the Horace Bushnell Memorial, Hartford CT, 30 April 1930. Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts & Printed Ephemera, Col. 95, no. 03 x 118.**



**ILL. 6. The Bedroom. Nathan Margolis Shop Exhibition of Authentic Handmade Reproductions in the Colonial Room of the Horace Bushnell Memorial, Hartford CT, 30 April 1930.**  
**Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts & Printed Ephemera, Col. 95, no. 03 x 118.**



**ILL. 7. The Living Room. Nathan Margolis Shop Exhibition of Authentic Handmade Reproductions in the Colonial Room of the Horace Bushnell Memorial, Hartford CT, 30 April 1930. Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts & Printed Ephemera, Col. 95, no. 03 x 118.**

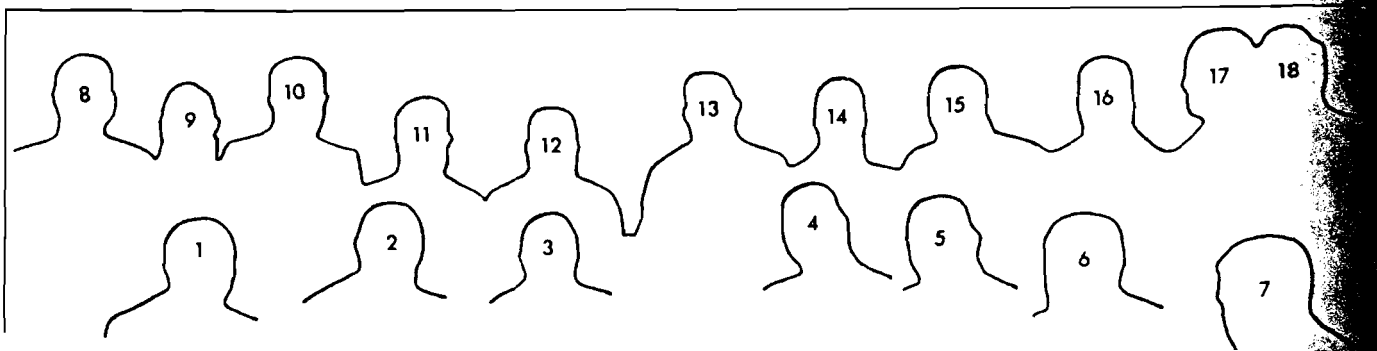


**ILL. 8. "Tiny Furniture Reproductions Shown at the Children's Museum,"**  
**West Hartford CT, *The Hartford Daily Times*, 22 July 1931.**



Members of the Walpole Society at their May 1933 meeting in Hartford. (1) George P. Winship, (2) George Dudley Seymour, (3) Henry Wood Erving, (4) George Francis Dow, (5) Chauncey Nash, (6) Luke Vincent Lockwood, (7) Dr. Samuel W. Woodhouse Jr., (8) Morgan

B. Brainard, (9) Henry Kent, (10) Henry Francis du Pont, (11) John Hill Morgan, (12) Norman Isham, (13) William Brownell Goodwin, (14) Frederic Pratt, (15) William Miller, (16) Philip Spalding, (17) R. T. H. Halsey, (18) Hollis French.



**ILL. 9. Members of the Walpole Society, 1933. William B. Hosley, Jr., "The Wallace Nutting Collection at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford CT" *The Magazine Antiques*, July 1984.**



**ILL. 10. View of Tapestry Hall. Exhibition of Connecticut Furniture. Wadsworth Atheneum Connecticut Tercentenary 1635-1935. *Wadsworth Atheneum Bulletin* vol. 13, no. 1 (January-June 1935): 13.**



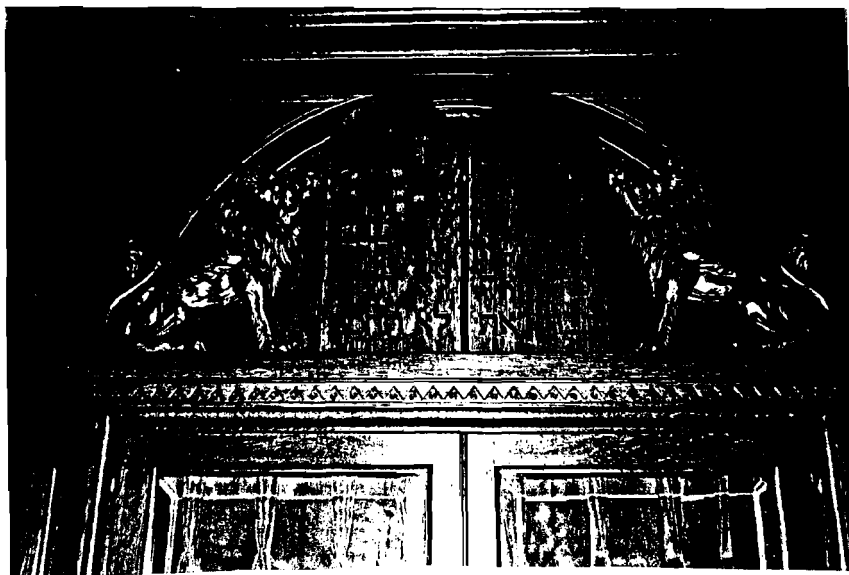
**ILL. 11. Room of Block-Fronts. Room of Block-Fronts. Exhibition of Connecticut Furniture. Wadsworth Atheneum Connecticut Tercentenary 1635-1935. *Wadsworth Atheneum Bulletin* vol. 13, no. 1 (January-June 1935): 13.**



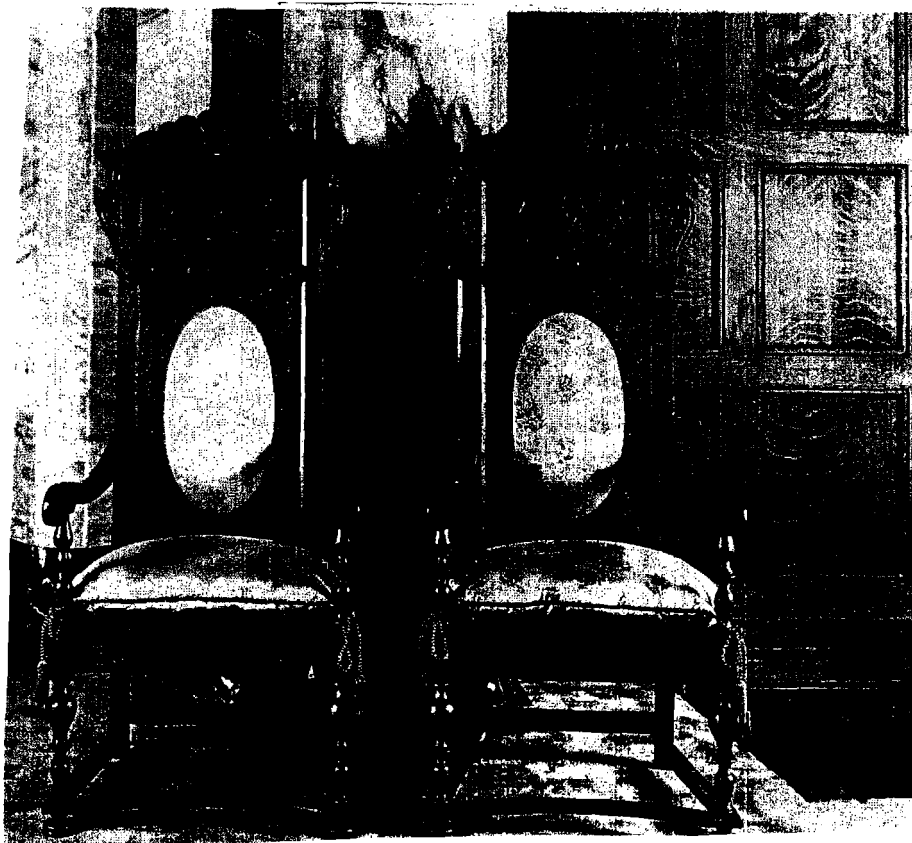
**ILL. 12.** Touro Club Washington's Birthday Children's Celebration, 1910.  
David G. Dalin, *Making A Life Building A Community* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1991) [insert unpaginated].



**ILL. 13** "Hartford Society Folk in Dress and Character of Colonial Days...", *The Hartford Daily Courant*, February 20, 1921.



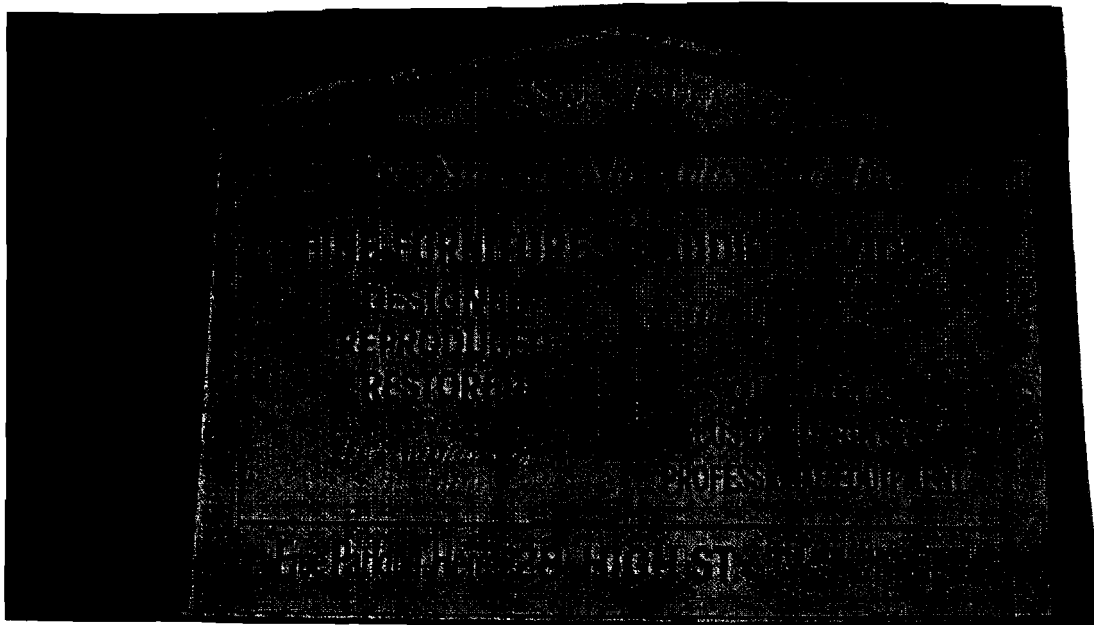
**ILL. 14. Two Carved Lions Guarding the Ten Commandment Tablets. Temple Beth Israel, 1936. Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts & Printed Ephemera, Col. 95, Box 26.**



**ILL. 15. Carved Temple Chairs, executed by the Margolis shop for Temple Beth Israel, West Hartford CT, 1936. Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts & Printed Ephemera, Col. 95, Box 26.**

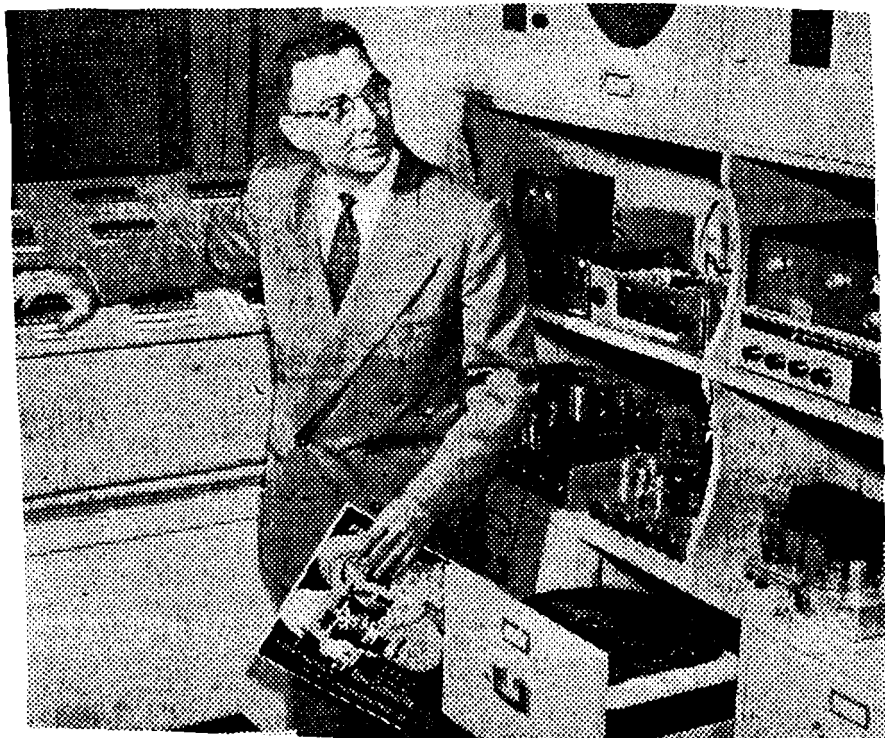


**ILL. 16. Dining Room Connecticut Governor's Residence, Hartford CT.**  
Margolis dining room chairs and table. "The Governor's Residence,"  
*Gallery Guide* 1991.

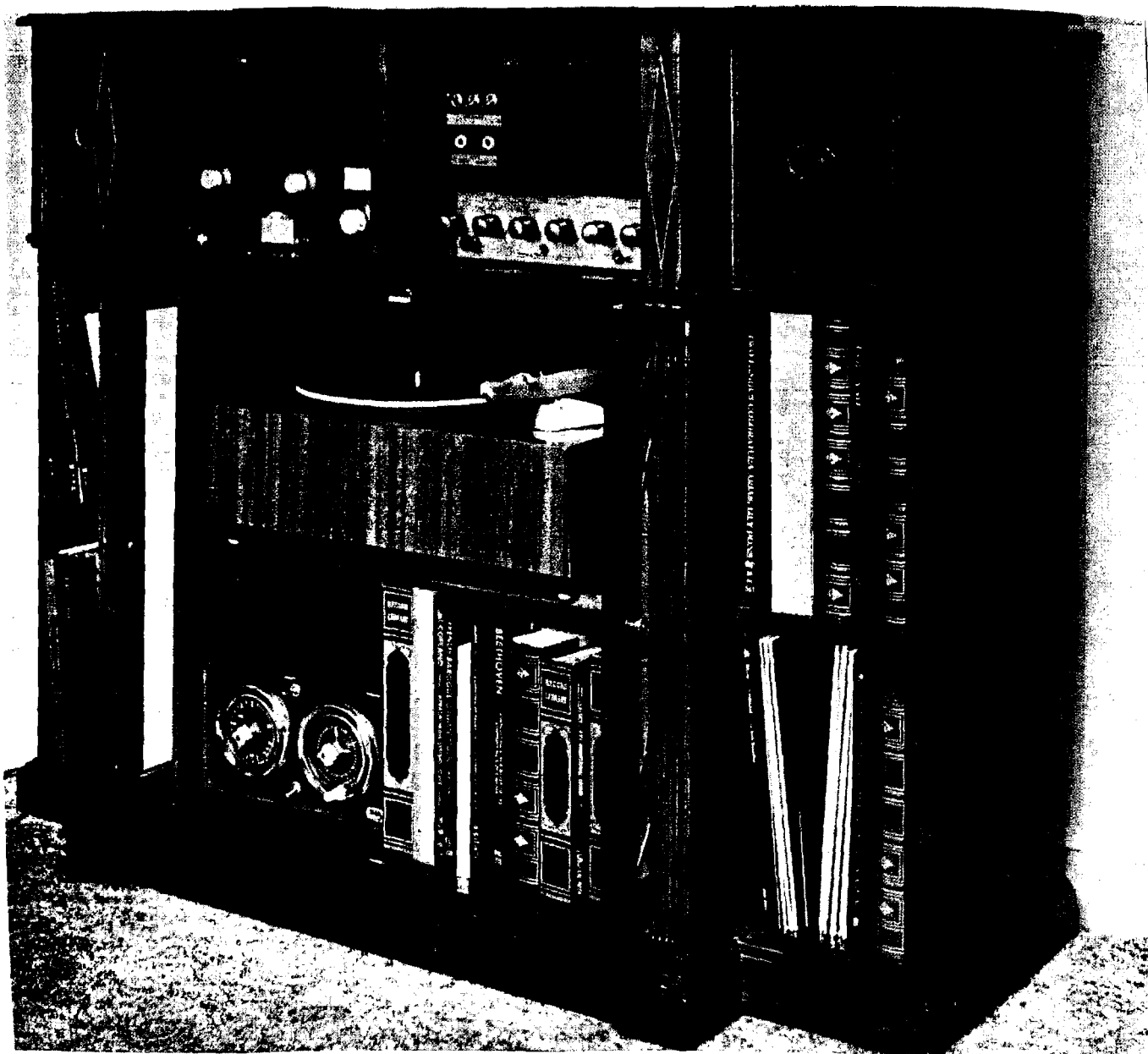


**ILL. 17. Margolis Shop Sign. High Street, Hartford CT, ca. 1950.**

Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts & Printed Ephemera, Col. 95, Box 26.



**ILL. 18. "Harold Margolis Takes a Look at High-Fidelity Field," *The Hartford Times*, date unknown. Courtesy, Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts & Printed Ephemera, Col. 95, Box 26.**



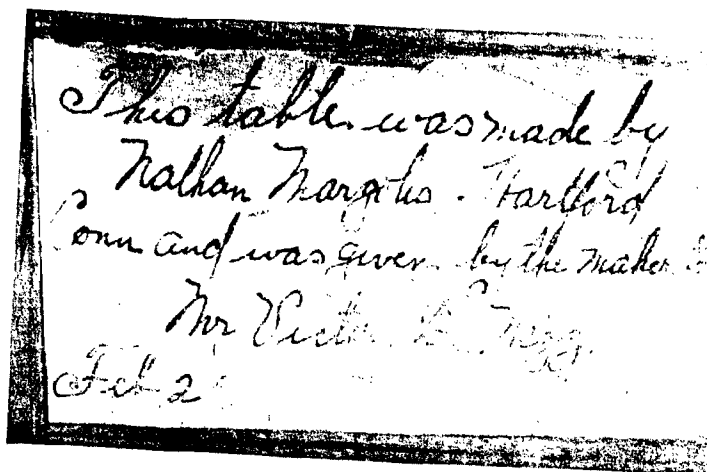
**ILL. 19. Margolis Shop Custom Stereo Cabinet, ca. 1950. Courtesy, Winterthur Library:  
Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts & Printed Ephemera, Col. 95, Box 26.**

## **APPENDIX C**

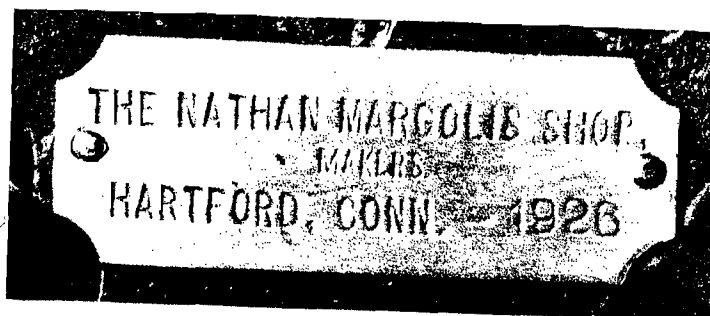
### **Margolis Furniture Labels**

# Furniture Brand Variations from the Workshop of Nathan Margolis

<http://www.mikemargolis.com>



ILL. 20. Handwritten Paper Label



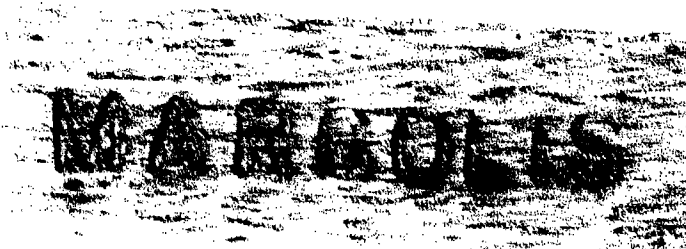
ILL. 21. Brass Plate



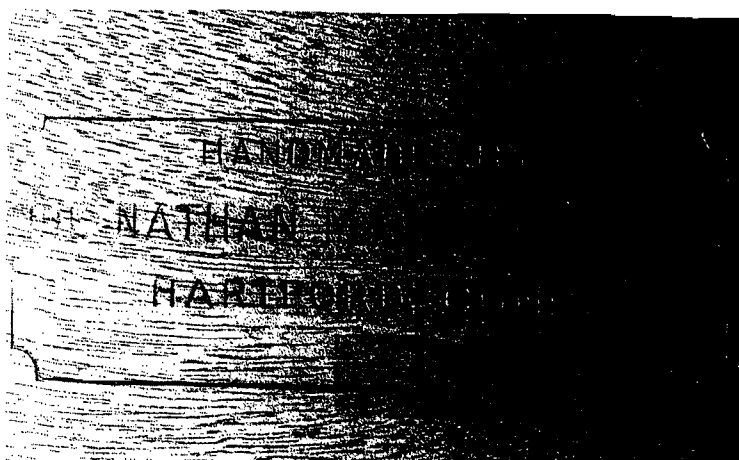
**ILL. 22. Printed Paper Label**



**ILL. 23. Burned Stamp with Date**



**ILL. 24. Burned Stamp without Date**



**ILL. 25. Brand with Border, Variation # 1**



**ILL. 26. Brand with Border, Variation # 2.**

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**Web Site** <http://www.mikemargolis.com>