

The Boston School of Frame Making

Editor's note: In this exclusive five-part series from frame conservator, frame historian, and master gilder William Adair, some of the most influential American frame makers are explored in depth. Adair also examines their iconic styles, which shaped the way frames were made for years to come.

In the first half of the seventeenth century, the Boston area became filled with English settlers when the anti-Puritan King Charles I began a crackdown on non-conformist religious thought. In 1630, John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, led a group of 600 colonists to America. He was founding a number of communities on the shores of Massachusetts Bay and the Charles River; notably, Winthrop's house was located where the city of Boston stands today. It's here that the story of Boston picture frames begins for me.

Some years ago, a client called and said a frame had fallen off the wall, and asked if I could come and fix it. I soon discovered it was a seventeenth-century, octagonal, reverse-profile, ebonized Dutch frame retaining its original mirror plate. Miraculously, it did not break—albeit in every joint of the frame, the glue had failed. When I turned it over to look at the back board, there inscribed in iron gall ink was the pedigree of the family, indi-

cating it was brought to America by my client's distant relative, John Winthrop.

Apparently, it had been handed down to my client through her grandfather. It had just survived the current fall off the wall, no doubt surviving many more episodes through time—and here it was in my hands. It gave me the great sense of personal worth to be able to treat such an important artifact and get it back to her without breaking the mirror. It was a simple yet profound job. It led me to think about the history of the many orphaned frames out there with no clues as to their origin.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most frames in America were imported from Europe, with rare exceptions in rural areas where deviations can be found. The new country's developing character demanded a strength and simplicity of design and construction. These characteristics unfolded



A portrait of frame maker John Doggett by Jonathan F. Guild (1871-1940). Courtesy of Dedham Historical Society and Museum



William Bruce Adair received his B.F.A. in studio art from the University of Maryland in 1972. For the next 10 years he worked for the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery as a museum conservator, specializing in the treatment of picture frames. In 1982 he formed Gold Leaf Studios to make frames and conserve gilded antiques. His clients have included the U.S. Department of State and the National Park Service. In 1991, he was awarded the Rome Prize in Design from The American Academy in Rome. Over the years, William has written articles in PFM that describe in detail some of the traditional embellishment techniques.

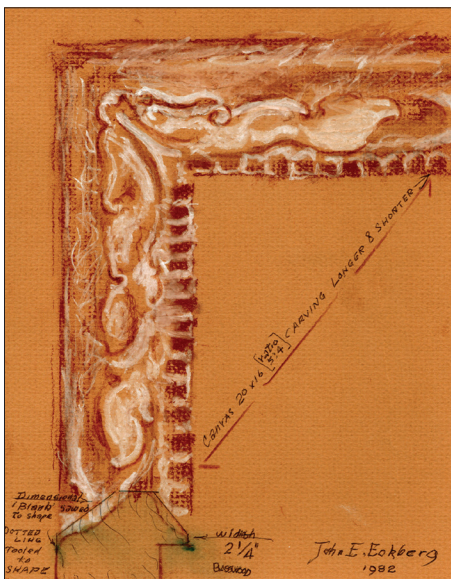
repeatedly within the various regional styles that developed, which were often influenced by specific immigrants and mixed with the traditions of established indigenous populations. Immigrants brought their skills and designs, but those designs were tweaked over time based on availability of raw materials and client expectations.

Early frames were made from architectural door and window trim of pine, joined with nails by carpenters. They were painted a dull black finish. They were painted a dull black finish, occasionally with the sight edge with chrome yellow to imitate gold. Later versions were painted with highly figured faux graining techniques. This was gradually replaced by proper carving and gilding as society demanded the latest styles and improvements to be considered fashionable.

After the war, the population in the Boston region gradually increased, providing work and enabling artisans to flock to the epicenter of New England culture. In the winter months, artisans migrated to points south along the eastern seaboard all the way to Charleston, SC, but the majority of time was spent creating furnishings and decorating interiors for the burgeoning middle class in New England and beyond.

Doggett Frames

John Doggett (1780-1857) was born in Dedham, south of Boston. He became an apprentice at the age of 15 to his uncle, Stephen Badlam, a looking-glass maker and cabinetmaker. The genealogy refers to his early career as a carver and gilder and repeats what must have been a family tradition—in that he paid an English gilder \$25 for instructions in the trade, a



A sketch of a frame design by Jack Eckberg circa 1982. Photo by Richard Whitney

common theme for arcane knowledge.

Doggett started in Roxbury in 1803 to become the town's first gilder with a shop. His son, John Jr., worked alongside his father making some of the finest frames in America. The company subsequently relocated to Boston, a move that took Doggett from a community of craftsmen and artisans into a growing center of artists and entrepreneurs. Doggett's brother, Samuel, served as his apprentice and later business partner.

By 1820, business had expanded into a new shop at 28 Market St. in Boston. He had begun buying and selling frames for looking glasses, prints, and

portraits. Later business concentrated more heavily on importing and manufacturing carpeting. He opened a branch in Philadelphia under the name of Doggett, Farnsworth & Co. and another in New York. Retiring between 1845 and 1850, he left business affairs in the hands of his brother, Samuel, and Samuel S. Williams and died seven years later.

Doggett was commissioned by the Wadsworth Atheneum sometime after Gilbert Stuart died in 1829 to make a pair of substantial protective frames for George and Martha Washington, done by Stuart from life in 1796. The composition rococo revival frames have a plate glass inner liner with recessed hinges and a keyhole with a lock on the other side, designed for easily opening and cleaning the plate glass on the inside without having to remove the frames from the wall—a mid-century innovation to keep soot from coal-burning fireplaces from discoloring these icons.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Boston continued the trend of innovative, nonconformist thought,



©2022 Framerica is a registered trademark of Framerica Corporation.

DECOR

MOULDING & SUPPLY

POLYBOND™ Glue

Specifically formulated for **polystyrene mouldings**

- Dries clear
- Easy-to-use
- Sets up quickly
- Control drop applicator
- Convenient twist off cap

Item #	Size	NOW ONLY
989 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2 oz.	\$6.99
990 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4 oz. Convenient size	\$13.29

1-800-937-1055 • order@decormoulding.com • exp 4/30/22

but in a gentle way that forced the older traditions to surrender. Bostonians are really creative rebels at heart, it seems. Major design trends such as the work of Ruskin and William Morris forged their way into more esoteric approaches of tonalism and abstractions inspired by the Japanese Aesthetic Cult Movement. Probably the most important and overlooked innovation that affected the arts at the time, and still does today, was the creation and implementation of camouflage theories by Boston-born Abbott Thayer (1849-1921).

Old Schwamb Mill

The hand-hewn, hammer-carved, rustic approach that Bostonians preferred became evident by the turn of the century. The Boston Society of Arts and Crafts, one of America's oldest arts and crafts organizations, organized the first frame exhibition in 1907. Many frame makers needed mouldings that were shaped with knives and mechanical cutters rather than making it all by hand; machines produced shaped frame moldings at a fraction of the time it took to hand-shape the wood.

A prominent business for frame milling in the Boston area was the Old Schwamb Mill, started in 1864 by Charles Schwamb and still active today. After a century of operating as a family-owned business, a remarkable transition from working factory to a living history museum was made possible by local pioneer preservationist Pat Fitzmaurice.

The Mill's unique nineteenth-century elliptical lathes, its original belt-driven shaft-and-pulley machinery, and the original hand-turning process are used to this day to create custom-made oval and circular frames for customers around the world. Sadly, the original wood shaper was sold in reorganizing the foundation.

Foster Brothers

John and Stephen Foster designed and manufactured frames out of a building on the corner of Mill and Summer Streets, a stone's throw away from the Old Schwamb Mill. They also had a showroom and small gallery in Boston on Park Square near the Boston Common. The brothers mixed disparate traditional elements in one frame, similar to the designs of contemporary New York architect Stanford White. For example, Dutch ripple patterns juxtaposed with beads, crosseted corners with Italian gadrooning patterns, all part of the creative urges of craftspersons everywhere.

Many frames kept to the Arts and Crafts style as well as the Renaissance revival popular during the period. Like the Carrig-Rohane shop, they specialized in elaborately detailed

frames. Some of their frames had an asphaltum glaze in the toning combined with double weight gold takes on an antique gold effect, creating a luminous aura surrounding the artwork. The Foster brothers also had a unique identification tag on the verso made of brass and inset into the verso of the frame with screws.

Murphy Frames

In 1903, Murphy opened the Carrig-Rohane frame shop in Winchester, MA. The shop was named after the Irish town where Murphy's father was born. Murphy and carver Charles Prendergast soon became successful and relocated to downtown Boston. By 1912, Walfred Thulin—another woodcarver and gilder from Sweden—and gilder Adrien Eckberg became the core members of the company, and by 1915, the level of business had grown to the point where Murphy asked his friend, art dealer Robert Vose, to take over its day-to-day management where it remained in operation until 1939.

During that time it was primarily run by Jack Eckberg, the son of Adrien Eckberg, who was the foreman of the shop. Robert introduced me to Jack in 1987, and we began to correspond about the history of gilding and framing in Boston. He worked with Murphy and had fond memories of materials, tools, and techniques they used to make some of the nation's most valuable and sought-after frames.

A classic Murphy-style frame consists of an inner flat molding and a stepped outer cap with incised Eastlake-inspired carving. The panel is often embellished with a scrafitto design, as seen in the Abbott Handerson Thayer Painting of Mount Monadnock (American Archives of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC). It is a superlative example of craftsmanship.

The Army Navy Club in Washington has a valuable Carrig-Rohane frame on the portrait of Lt. Gen. James G. Harbord by Richard Meryman, Sr. (a Boston artist who studied with Abbott Thayer). It has the insignias of the Army's second division, the Marine Corps insignia of the globe and eagle and anchor, and finally the insignia for the Navy, a four-masted ship. All branches of the service were represented in the frame for this beloved man who earned a beautiful, hand-carved, gilded frame and a fitting portrait.

These are just a few of the creative minds who shaped the way frames were made in Boston, New England, and America as a whole. Their influence can still be felt today. In future installments of this series, we will look at notable framers of Bucks County, California, New York, and Chicago. Stay tuned. **PFM**