

# THE JACOB SASS DESK AND BOOKCASE

*Documenting a Provenance, Preserving a History*

BY BRANDY S. CULP



This desk and bookcase (Fig. 1) is one of the few examples of eighteenth-century Charleston furniture with an indisputable attribution: written on the interior of a desk drawer is the inscription “Made by Jacob Sass—Charleston/ Octr. 1794—£25—JS” (Fig. 2). The desk and bookcase has permanently returned to the city of its origin as the result of a collaborative effort between Historic Charleston Foundation (HCF) and Winterthur Museum. In 2008 Winterthur, which had loaned the case piece since 2000, offered it to HCF for acquisition.

While the desk and bookcase’s monumental proportions, fine construction, and use of quality mahogany veneer command notice, it is not the most high-style example of Charleston neoclassical furniture. The authors of *The Furniture of Charleston* (2003), Bradford Rauschenberg and John Bivins, lamented that Sass did not sign a more ambitious example of his work. However, what the object lacks in decorative panache, it makes up for in historical significance.

In the post-Revolutionary War years, German artisans played a seminal role in furthering the city’s cabinetmaking trade. Foremost among these individuals was Jacob Sass (1750-1836). The cabinetmaker’s life and career are well documented. A native of Schenstad, Hessen, Sass immigrated to Charleston in 1773 and served as a lieutenant during the Revolutionary War. He enjoyed as much success in his military career as in his cabinetmaking endeavors, becoming Wagon Master General of South Carolina and lieutenant colonel by 1808 (Fig. 3). Sass was among the first craftsmen to publicly renew his trade after the Revolution, operating a successful workshop into the nineteenth century.

**Fig. 1:** Desk and Bookcase, made by Jacob Sass (German born, 1750–1836), Charleston, South Carolina, 1794. Mahogany and mahogany veneer with yellow pine, cypress, and white pine, H. 108, W. 61¼, D. 26 in. Historic Charleston Foundation; collection fund purchase with contributions by Douglas H. Sass, Herbert R. Sass III, and Mary Witsell, and through prior gift of Lt. Gov. Nancy Stevenson. 2008.15.01. Photography courtesy of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts.

Made when the Neoclassical style was at the height of fashion, elements of the desk and bookcase still reference the colonial era, demonstrating how members of Charleston's German school carried styles from one period into another. Design and construction features, such as the location of the pigeon holes and the paneling of the entire back rather than the use of solid backboards, are characteristic of those employed by the city's German cabinetmakers.<sup>1</sup> Adhering to the high standards of craftsmanship common among Charleston's eighteenth-century artisans, Sass employed the finest of construction techniques and materials.

While Sass provided us with details as to the bookcase's origin, scholars have long speculated about its subsequent history and eventual acquisition for Winterthur Museum in circa 1966 by founder Henry Francis du Pont (1880–1969). Recent research has revealed that the desk and bookcase spent the majority of its 215 years in the Miles Brewton House in Charleston, one of the grandest Georgian dwellings in America. Until the 1960s, the object was referred to as a “secretary” in primary documentation. In 1944, Susan Pringle Frost (1873–1960), then owner of the residence, pictured the desk, without its bookcase, in *Highlights of the Miles Brewton House*. This

house and lot of land in King Street in Charleston...being my present residence with all the furniture therein.”<sup>3</sup> It was believed that the secretary was part of the noted furnishings. Yet new evidence has found that while Mary Pringle inherited the Miles Brewton House from her father, it appears she received the Sass desk and bookcase from her father-in-law, John Julius Pringle (1756–1843), and it may not have come to reside at the house until his death. In the mid 1870s, Mary Pringle penned a will and a memorandum that included an inventory of items to be divided among her heirs. In the memorandum dated July 7, 1876, she wrote, “To my daughter Susan Pringle I give and bequeath the Secretary that stands in the drawing room, used by her dear father and designated as his Secretary. It was given to me by my husband's father [John Julius Pringle], and I wish it used by my dear husband so long as he lives [and] after his death I desire it to be given to my daughter Susan.”<sup>4</sup>

Mary's father-in-law, John Julius Pringle, was the son of prosperous Scottish merchant and public servant, Robert Pringle (1702–1776). Pringle followed in his father's path, becoming a prominent lawyer and statesman. After attending the College of Philadelphia, he read law with John Rutledge, delegate to the

enough to accommodate two sitters. The Sass desk and bookcase was clearly a utilitarian commission meant to serve Pringle's business needs.

After John Julius Pringle gave the desk to his daughter-in-law, Mary, it became a venerated heirloom, and family papers were stored in its interior, some of which were found in the desk by Winterthur Museum in 1966. As outlined in her will, Mary bequeathed the desk to her daughter Susan Pringle (1829–1917). A spinster, Susan Pringle was the matriarch of the extended family that resided at the Miles Brewton House.

According to historian Sidney Bland, Pringle shared a particularly close relationship with her nieces and instilled in them a keen sense of independence and respect for their lineage.<sup>5</sup> In her will probated in 1917, she declared, “I also desire my said three Frost nieces to keep all of the letters and papers that may be in my large secretary or elsewhere at the time of my death.”<sup>6</sup> These nieces—Mary, Susan, and Rebecca—also inherited a share of the Miles Brewton House. A year after their aunt's death they purchased the house and some of the contents within, including the Sass desk and bookcase, from the other family heirs.<sup>7</sup> The Jacob Sass desk and bookcase most likely remained in the downstairs parlor from the time it was given to Mary Pringle until own-

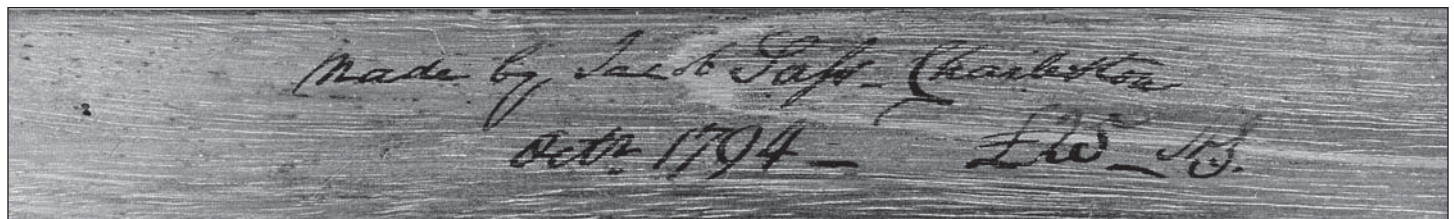


Fig. 2: Inscription on the side interior desk drawer reads, “Made by Jacob Sass Charleston/ Octr. 1794 - £ 25 - JS.”

evidence implies that the desk may have spent much of its history separated from its upper case.

Both the house and the desk and bookcase descended in the female line of the family. By way of oral tradition, it was previously thought that Sass made the item for planter William Alston (1756–1839) and his second wife, Mary Brewton Motte (ca. 1770–1838), who purchased the house in 1791.<sup>2</sup> In 1839, Alston bequeathed to their daughter Mary Motte Alston Pringle (1803–1884) “my dwelling

Continental Congress and South Carolina's first governor. He spent the greater part of the Revolutionary War abroad, during which time he served as secretary to Ralph Izard, United States commissioner in Tuscany. From 1792 to 1808, Pringle was the attorney general of South Carolina. He may have commissioned the desk and bookcase from Sass to be used in his office, which would explain both its large size and relatively humble appearance. The height of the desk exceeds that of an average chair—it is better suited to a tall stool; and it is wide

ership of the Miles Brewton House passed from Susan Pringle and then to the three nieces.

How Henry Francis du Pont came to acquire the desk is still unknown. Susan Pringle Frost's sister, Rebecca, was a dear friend of Irene and Irénée du Pont, Henry's second cousin. For over fifty years, “Rebe” worked as Irene's personal secretary and governess to the du Pont's children. Because of this relationship, in 1917, the du Ponts loaned Susan Pringle Frost the money to purchase the Miles Brewton House as well as substantial funds over the years to



**Fig. 3:** *Portrait of Jacob Sass*, attributed to Thomas Coram, c. 1805-07. Oil on canvas, 37 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 28 $\frac{7}{16}$  inches. Photography courtesy of the German Friendly Society and Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts.

In the early nineteenth century, the patriotic Sass was painted in his full military regalia. He holds a scroll detailing the “Officers & Privates/ of the German Fusilier Company at the/ Siege of Savannah/ October 1779.”

acquire numerous at-risk properties on the Charleston Peninsula. Susan Pringle Frost was the founder and first president of the Society of the Preservation of Old Dwellings (now the Preservation Society of Charleston) and through this organization and her own efforts, she helped save many of the city’s historic structures.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, her real estate ventures caused her to remain greatly in debt for much of her life. It had been assumed that she sold the desk and bookcase to Henry Frances du Pont, possibly to alleviate some financial woes.

However, in her probate dated 1960, among the items listed in her parlor is a “large mahogany secretary-bookcase” valued at \$550—a significant amount compared to other furnishings in her possession.

Although the circumstances under which du Pont acquired the Jacob Sass desk and bookcase remain to be discovered, we can now trace the historic ownership of the object from prominent public servant John Julius Pringle through the venerable women in the Pringle-Frost family to the present. Given the desk and

bookcase’s association with the founding patron of Charleston’s preservation movement, it is only fitting that its final home be Historic Charleston Foundation’s 1808 Nathaniel Russell House, a National Historic Landmark.

With every collection acquisition, such as this example, HCF works to preserve the city’s unique material past. HCF remains dedicated to securing key decorative and fine art holdings with local provenances, especially those artifacts that originated in Charleston. For more information visit [www.historiccharleston.org](http://www.historiccharleston.org) or call 843.723.1623. @

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1. Brandford L. Rauschenberg and John Bivins Jr. *The Furniture of Charleston 1680–1820* vol. II (Winston-Salem, N.C.: The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, 2003), 462–463.
2. William Alston purchased 27 King Street from his mother-in-law Rebecca Brewton Motte and her sister Frances Brewton Pinckney, who had inherited the house upon the untimely death of their brother, Miles Brewton. Richard N. Côté, *Guide to the Alston-Pringle-Frost Manuscript Collection in the South Carolina Historical Society* (SCHS, 1990), 9–10.
3. Will of William Alston, Will Book H (1834–1839), microfilm, 445–49. Charleston County Public Library.
4. Mary makes mention of two secretaries in her will and memorandum—one also to be given to her son: “The secretary in my chamber I will and devise to my son William Alston Pringle. It having been owned by his grandfather Alston.” Overwhelming evidence from the memorandum suggests that his secretary is not the desk signed by Sass. Memorandum, Will of Mary Motte Pringle (transcript), July 15, 1872 to July 7, 1876. Alston-Pringle-Frost Papers, Box 28/638. SCHS.
5. See Sidney R. Bland, *Preserving Charleston’s Past, Shaping Its Future: The Life and Times of Susan Pringle Frost* (Columbia, S.C.: Univ. of S.C. Press), 7.
6. Last Will and Testament of Susan Pringle (1829–1917) (transcript), 1914. Alston-Pringle-Frost Papers, Box 28/638. SCHS.
7. Susan Pringle Frost and her sisters dispersed cash and family heirlooms in payment for the house. A typed document, “Inventory of articles not disposed of by the wills of Mrs. Wm. B. Pringle and Susan Pringle,” and a handwritten list of items with the names of the people who did receive material are included among the manuscripts. The desk and bookcase was not among these items, as it remained at the Miles Brewton House in the possession of Susan Pringle Frost. Alston-Pringle-Frost Papers, Box 28/638. SCHS.
8. See Bland, *Preserving Charleston’s Past, Shaping Its Future*, 55–61.