



# HANDS EMPLOYED ARIGHT

*The Furniture Making of Jonathan Fisher (1768-1847)*

Joshua A. Klein

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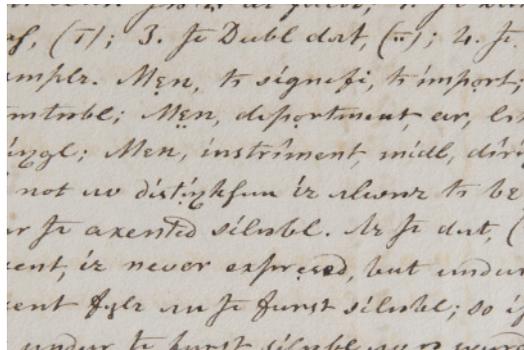
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*For Julia, my companion and love.*



*“[Jonathan Fisher’s journals are] not easy for an expert to decipher. In those journals probably lies information of value to the public which some day may be brought to its knowledge.”*

– R. G. F. Candage, 1900 <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Candage, Rufus George Frederick, *A Biographical Sketch of the Rev. Jonathan Fisher, Pastor of the Congregational Church in Bluehill, Maine; interspersed with extracts from his journals written by himself*, 1900, p 6-7.

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Jon. Fisher

# Foreword

One of my favorite sentiments, occasionally expressed by honest historians and the title of at least a couple of books, is “The Past is a foreign country.” The implications of this are clear. While we may learn a portion of The Past, we can never fully know it. Often purveyors of “History” (me included) devolve into peddling their own version of a historical record so it furthers their personal perspective. I say this not as a criticism, well, not entirely as the bias may be unconscious, but to note the frequent paucity of facts we must sift through when attempting to understand occurrences long past. Even if the facts are not scarce, they can never be complete, and thus we often fill in the lacunae with our own conjecture, suppositions and assumptions, thus imposing these subjective preferences on a time or place that is in effect, a “foreign country.” In some instances, The Past is more like an alien land than merely a foreign country, and its inhabitants are an unknown species. The lives of these aliens are so unrelated to our own that the ideas they contemplated, the beliefs they held, the technology they possessed and the daily routine of their lives are almost incomprehensible.

The tale of Jonathan Fisher is no mere vignette, however. It is one of the richest first-hand accounts of a life, community and artistry of a provincial American villager ever known. Further, nearly the entire material culture of Fisher’s life is extant, complete and cataloged. Given these riches and his own insights, Joshua Klein has been able to almost crawl inside the skin of his subject and let us see Fisher’s world through Fisher’s eyes. And what a panorama it is! The detail is astonishing, and its telling could veer equally down the paths of the sublime or ridiculous. In the hands of someone self-absorbed, Fisher’s detailed accounts could resemble little more than a tedious recitation of an evening at dinner. Instead it is an irreplaceable time capsule compiled

by a gifted and thoughtful man who self-consciously led and recorded a life well-lived.

The convergence of Joshua’s interests with this trove of information mere minutes away from his home in rural midcoast Maine leading to this remarkable book suggests to me more than a hint of The Divine at work. The portrait of Fisher and the c.1800 profile of a place named Blue Hill is a captivating one that needed to be told with passion and knowledge. Fortunately, Joshua shared that goal and fulfilled it exquisitely. Through him we are blessed in knowing well this morsel of the past.

Fisher gives every evidence of unstinting honesty about himself, his work and his daily life. Joshua has wisely adopted the same approach, at times quizzically questioning Fisher’s techniques of making furniture. More than three decades ago a friend remarked to me that, “In the olden days, most furniture was varnish on the outside and bark on the inside.” Joshua learned himself that this sentiment was only slightly hyperbolic. Fortunately, he had a plethora of physical evidence to “read” Fisher’s work and deduce Fisher’s working scheme. Despite this, there are instances where the trail leads nowhere, and Joshua humbly says, in effect, “I don’t know.”

The burden of life on the Maine frontier was not something Fisher romanticized; in all likelihood “the Romantic” was not part of his lexicon. Much like The Apostle Paul with whom he shared common cause, Fisher was burdened by “a thorn in the flesh.” Despite nagging pain and illness, he remained focused at being productive, including making astonishing quantities of artistic, ingenious and humble works in addition to annually gathering perhaps 15 to 20 cords of firewood required to make it through the brutal Maine winters.

The litany of Fisher’s output is immense, ranging from the mundane – storage boxes, simple chairs and

case pieces – through sophisticated works of precision tool making, mechanical devices, elegant furniture and woodworking, and even to the realm of fine art in his decorative paint-work and easel paintings. Notwithstanding the fact that we might characterize him as “being wrapped pretty tight,” Fisher was a compelling and engaging personality who clearly could not turn off his mind and fastidiously structured his time to be productive, always productive. Even among the hard-working folks of the frontier he was renowned for his accomplishments. We would have been well-served by spending time with him, perhaps even working alongside him.

In the final analysis, he was a faithful Minister of The Gospel, an energetic, self-disciplined and skilled craftsman, mathematician, inventive genius and sage observer of his place and time. Although Fisher passed into Eternity many generations ago, thanks to Joshua’s conscientious diligence you can now join me in thinking of this upright Renaissance Man as a model for my own faith, citizenship, craftsmanship and creativity.

This path is not without costs, but the rewards are incalculable.

— Donald C. Williams



# Acknowledgements

No book that spans several disciplines can be written without the wisdom and support of colleagues. Many hours were spent with friends and associates discussing the Fisher artifacts and story. All have contributed to this research by directing my course and refining my conclusions.

First of all, I am grateful to Christopher Schwarz and John Hoffman for taking a chance on this book (and its author). Without their support and advice, this manuscript would have surely floundered. My good friend Donald C. Williams was especially helpful to me in the earliest days of the research. His generosity to share his own experiences on similar projects became the guiderails for me as I examined artifacts and developed the manuscript.

During the past few years, I've had many conversations with fellow craftsmen who helped me contextualize Fisher's work and tools. Thomas Lie-Nielsen, Deneb Puchalski, Peter Follansbee, Freddy Roman, Bob Mustain and George Walker all provided helpful insights that opened my eyes to new ways of interpreting Fisher's work.

Several planemakers and tool collectors kindly shared their knowledge with me, elucidating some of the details of Fisher's tools. Larry Williams, Don McConnell, Steve Voigt and Caleb James helped fill in the gaps in my understanding of wooden plane identification and construction. H.G. "Skip" Brack and Chris Bender provided invaluable assistance from a collector's point of view.

Some aspects of Fisher's life were foreign territory to me. Bud Warren of the Tide Mill Institute provided information on New England windmills, and Russell Hamilton and Glenn Fisher were vital sources of information about early 19th-century congregationalism.

Narayan Nayar generously advised me on several technical and photographic considerations.

Several important research trips were funded by generous grants from The Early American Industries Association and the Society of American Period Furniture Makers. Both institutions' missions are so closely aligned with the objective of this book so I am honored to have their blessing and support.

It should go without saying that this book is only possible because of the openness and generosity of the Jonathan Fisher Memorial. Brad Emerson, in particular, has been immensely helpful in providing details about Blue Hill history and Fisher's life and descendants. Amey Dodge and Rick Sawyer also provided support and answers throughout the years of this research. On several occasions, Nicole Lawton helped me navigate the Fisher archives to find specific documents.

The Farnsworth Museum, which owns many of the artifacts in this book, cherishes the Fisher collection deeply and is enthusiastic to see his life and work celebrated. Michael Komanecky, Angela Waldron, Jane Bianco, Sheryl McMahan and Robert Colburn arranged and facilitated several research trips to examine and measure the tools in their collection. I am grateful for their careful preservation of the Jonathan Fisher artifacts and their generosity to share them with the world.

Richard Boulet and Karen Wyatt at the Blue Hill Public Library kindly facilitated my photocopying of their copy of the Jonathan Fisher Journals.

Sandra Waxman at the Dedham Historical Society, Shelley Cathcart at Old Sturbridge Village, Lauri Perkins at Winterthur and Eric Litke at the Yale Furniture Study all gave time out of their busy schedules to track down records and manuscripts or to allow me to examine furniture in their collections.

Charles Hummel at Winterthur donated an entire week to take me under his wing to advise the research

behind this book. We spent many hours sorting through the Fisher story as well as examining tools in the Dominy workshop and furniture in Winterthur's innumerable period rooms. There are fingerprints of Mr. Hummel's wise counsel woven throughout every chapter in this book.

It has meant a lot to me that Gerald W.R. Ward has supported this project from early on. I am especially grateful for his review of the manuscript and for the opportunity to lean on his expertise when refining the presentation of this material.

At the end of such a long project, it is easy to lose steam. My good friend and assistant, Michael Updegraff, provided the much-needed boost to see this thing through to the end. He gave hours of help at the Fisher house during the photography sessions, graciously critiqued the earliest (and least intelligible) versions of my

manuscript and, most importantly, helped to refine my conclusions with his astute observations. I am honored to work side by side every day with such a skilled and knowledgeable friend.

Writers are trying people to live with. My family has put up with endless dinner-table jabber about plane iron camber and grain painting. My dear wife, Julia, not only allowed me to go on several research trips during the past few years, but also kindly abided my spending many midnights' oil at those crucial times in the research. I cannot express how critical her support and love has been to the success of this project. My three boys, Eden, Asher and Wyeth, delight me every day with their enthusiasm and creativity. May my young men learn well the lessons Fisher teaches us by his life.

Joshua Klein  
October 2017





# Introduction

## The Strange Yet Familiar World of Jonathan Fisher

In 2013, I never could have anticipated what I was about to see. Pulling into the driveway of the Jonathan Fisher House in Blue Hill, Maine, I was looking to learn about the unstudied furniture making of the town's revered patriarch I'd kept hearing about. They walked me through the house and showed me all the furniture that had survived (most of which was attributed to his hand), helped arrange for me to examine the tools used to make the furniture (which were also made by him, by the way), and then took me into the archives with boxes upon boxes of manuscripts, notebooks and letters, plus 40 years' worth of daily journal entries about everything the man did every single day. Then they handed me the keys. Literally.

It was five years ago when Jonathan Fisher Memorial's former board president, Brad Emerson, first told me the story of the astonishing survival of Fisher's journal, objects and narrative. Having learned of it, I immediately got a photocopy of the transcribed journals and all available published research on Fisher and began to dig in. It was beyond my expectations. The journals described making his tools, setting up his lathe and walking the commissioned pieces to his clients' houses. This level of documentation and survival of artifacts was unprecedented because most pre-industrial cabinetmakers' lives were undocumented in any detail. Usually, historians have little more to go on than an account book and some attributed furniture. Even the most comprehensive surviving collection of tools and furniture, the Dominy collection owned by Winterthur, still lacked insight into what these men were like and

what made them tick. Fortunately for us, Fisher was an educated man who was taught the value of recording his life. Unlike many other craftsmen who were completely focused on putting bread on the table, Fisher took the time to record the smallest details of his life. Reading



In this self-portrait painted by Jonathan Fisher in 1824, Fisher represents himself as the learned minister in his study pointing at the Hebrew Bible. — SELF PORTRAIT, 1825; OIL ON CANVAS. 31-1/2" X 27-1/2"; COLLECTION OF BLUE HILL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH.



This 1814 addition to Fisher's house has been the subject of many postcards and photographs of Blue Hill throughout the years. The house's importance to the community has ensured its careful preservation as a historic landmark.



Fisher's house, open seasonally for tours, is full of furniture and other objects made by the parson. Being able to see the furniture he made in its original context helps us understand how and why he made furniture.

his journal, I noted every reference related to furniture making and became immersed in Fisher's world. There were many fascinating and unexpected connections to Fisher, such as his direct lineage to Thomas Lie-Nielsen, of Lie-Nielsen Toolworks, in nearby Warren. It wasn't long before I joined the board of directors to help "perpetuate the memory, spirit, works and teachings" of the man. My work on the board greatly contributed to my understanding of Fisher's multifaceted legacy. It has been an honor to labor in this research and shed light on this inexplicably unnoticed corner of our decorative arts history.

The story of Fisher is unique in its completeness. Almost no other pre-industrial cabinetmaker's life was as well documented and preserved as Fisher's. Because of his journal we know the answers to questions such as: What was going on in his mind as he built a piece? What was his life like that day, that week? What physical ailments was he experiencing that affected his work? What was his perspective on the pieces he made? Did he find satisfaction in working with his hands or was he dying to get out of the trade to enjoy a gentlemen's leisure? When it comes to the lives of pre-industrial craftsmen, we almost never have answers to those questions. More often than not, we are stuck with little more than educated guesses. In the case of Fisher, however, we are deluged with so much information that it would take a lifetime to work through the archives.



Thomas Lie-Nielsen and me examining a few of Fisher's surviving tools. — PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER SCHWARZ.

Fisher (1768-1847) was the first settled minister in the frontier town of Blue Hill, Maine. Born in New Braintree, Mass., Fisher studied at Harvard College to prepare for a lifetime of faithful service to the Congregational church. Fisher has been described as a "Renaissance man," a rural Jeffersonian polymath. He was at once a minister, scientist, artist, architect, linguist, historian, inventor, poet, farmer and craftsman. It is no exaggeration to say that what this man accomplished was absolutely incredible. He left behind an immense body of work that reveals not only his level of productivity but also so much about his personality and artistic vision. One Fisher historian has said, "One of the things that makes the Fisher furniture so important is that everything survived. Fisher writes about making the furniture, who he made it for, and the tools he made it with survive. It's really an extraordinary thing."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Osborn, Jennifer, "Furniture Restorer Gives New Life to Pieces," *Ellsworth American*, September 17, 2014.



In my shop during the replication of the card table attributed to Fisher. Recreating this piece (and others) helped me understand Fisher's mindset as a maker.

The opportunity we're presented with in this story and the value of sharing it in its fullness was something that could not be ignored.

I remember talking with Don Williams, retired senior furniture conservator at the Smithsonian Institution, about his struggles working on his book about the tool cabinet of piano-maker H.O. Studley.<sup>3</sup> Although Don had access to the entire cabinet full of hundreds of tools and artifacts, his challenge was unearthing information about who Studley was. Studley left no paper trail of letters describing his work, little of his other woodwork has been identified and much of the research required extensive traveling. This is the way this research often goes.

When Don visited my wife and me in Maine a few years ago, I took him through the Fisher house. As we walked around the house looking at artifacts, we discussed the fact that the Fisher story had the opposite problem. Fisher's house (five minutes from my own) is full of furniture, tools, paintings, journals and letters. The archives brim with tiny notebooks full of 18th- and 19th-century script, most of which was written in a shorthand he developed at Harvard College. There are boxes of drawings, historic photographs and archaeological findings. Digesting this enormous body of information to discern a cogent furniture-making narrative would be an enormous task. If Studley was about accumulation, Fisher was about distillation.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, Donald C., Nayar, Narayan, *Virtuoso: The Tool Cabinet and Workbench of Henry O. Studley*, Lost Art Press, 2015.



The Fisher House archives are full of notebooks such as this one, which detail his daily activities in his own unique shorthand. — JONATHAN FISHER MEMORIAL.

## The Objective of This Book

I always fell asleep in history class. Memorizing names, dates and events out of context only to be regurgitated for a test did not grab my attention as a child. It was not until college that I saw the value of understanding our past. During my time at the National Institute of Wood Finishing, my instructor, Mitch Kohanek, introduced me to the world of furniture conservation and scholarship. My time at this school set me on a trajectory to rediscover the wisdom of the generations of craftsmen in whose footsteps we follow.

Why study history? What is so important about looking into the past to inform our present? This



Learning to do things the way Fisher did was eye-opening. Replicating his dovetail angles exactly felt like walking in his shoes.

research has been, both personally and professionally, an opportunity to reach beyond what I was comfortable with and to question convention. During my time with Fisher I've become so familiar with him that he has almost become a mentor to me. I saw how he dealt with failures and how he interacted with his community with integrity. Like every good mentor, though, his peculiarities and pungencies were a check to me and forced me to reassess my own ways of viewing my work and life. (How could someone meticulously grain paint the front panels and yet leave the backboards rough-sawn from the mill?)

Because I had so many primary source documents about what made this man tick, I knew that to do Fisher justice, I had to present him in unrestrained honesty. His views of the world clash with many of our own. His approach to furniture making violates modern woodworking dogma. It was stepping into this strange world of Fisher, however, that opened my eyes to the value of holding the strangeness and the familiarity of his life in balance.



It was only after replicating this card table that I felt like I could comprehend the logic of its construction.



There were many moments in the research in which I was struck by how foreign this way of working was to modern woodworking. Seeing the insides left surprisingly coarse caused me to reconsider the way I approached my work.

Sam Wineburg has written, “[There is] a tension that underlies every encounter with the past: the tension between the familiar and the strange, between feelings of proximity and feelings of distance in relation to the people we seek to understand. Neither of these extremes does justice to history’s complexity, and veering to one side or the other dulls history’s jagged edges and leaves us with cliché and caricature. ...

“There is no easy way around the tension between the familiar past, which seems so relevant to our present needs, and the strange and inaccessible past, whose applicability is not immediately manifest. The tension exists because both aspects are essential and irreducible. On the one hand, we need to feel kinship with the people we study, for this is exactly what engages our interest and makes us feel connected. ... But this is only half the story ... we need to encounter the distant past – a past less distant from us in time than in its modes of thought and social organization. It is this past, one that leaves us befuddled or, worse, just plain bored, that we need most if we are to achieve the understanding that each of us is more than the handful of labels ascribed to us at birth. The sustained encounter with this less-familiar past teaches us the limitations of our brief sojourn in the planet and allows us to take membership in the entire human race. Paradoxically, the relevance of the past may lie precisely in what strikes us as its initial irrelevance.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Wineburg, Sam, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, Temple University Press, 2001, p 5-7.



The bottom of this drawer from Fisher's desk not only shows the rough fore plane marks, but also the tear-out and knots he often left in his furniture. While this might be surprising to some readers, this kind of workmanship was standard on secondary surfaces.

It is my hope that this encounter with the furniture making of Fisher does exactly that for you. Fisher's ways of working may seem so distant and so irrelevant to you that it forces you to expand your mind. So be it. I hope you find in his story encouragement and inspiration, as I have.

### Warts & All

Despite the fact that I have fallen in love with Fisher's work, I knew I needed to avoid writing hagiography. It is important to be up front about the fact that his work is not going to impress prestigious connoisseurs. Fisher did not build ostentatious masterpieces for the urban elite. Instead, his calling was to provide simple furniture made of local woods for his conservative, budget-conscious clientele.

Fisher was transparent about his mistakes, too. On Dec. 30, 1814, he wrote, "Painted a little upon Dec. Stevens' sleigh. Worked the rest of the day on picture frame plane stock. Stuck a chisel in the thumb of my left hand." In March of 1805, after having done the task many times before, he wrote, "Worked upon a chair; broke it putting it together. Began another."

It's Fisher's honesty that makes this story so compelling. What woodworker can't relate to an unsuccessful assembly or to workshop injuries? These everyday journal entries provide the context to understand Fisher's work. Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich provides this assessment of the quotidian nature of the diary of a midwife contemporary to Fisher, "Both the difficulty and the value of the diary lie in its astonishing steadiness. ... (I)t is in the very dailiness, the exhaustive, repetitious dailiness, that the real power ... lies."

Indeed. It is this very fact that makes this survival so significant. The story of Fisher allows us to step into his world to see what life was like for a 19th-century furniture maker on the eastern frontier.



Although many of his tools were carefully made, this rabbet plane shows us the pragmatic side of Fisher. This tear-out does not affect the function of the tool.

### A Blended Approach

The approach of this book is to show Fisher's furniture making from a number of angles. Rather than handle the presentation of the research as a conventional historical monograph, it takes a multidisciplinary approach that better reflects the uniqueness of the material Fisher left behind. This book attempts to merge the historian's rigor for sniffing out documentary evidence, the conservator's eye for examination of artifacts, and the maker's hands-on shop knowledge (especially in the "Shop-based Research" chapter). This merger of disciplines is one that some readers may be familiar with in my publication *Mortise & Tenon Magazine*. Truth be told, the development of this blend of approaches had its genesis in my research for this book. As I examined Fisher's things, I was forced over and over again to step out-



It took several years of close examination to document and comprehend the body of furniture Fisher made. Various kinds of lighting from many different angles helped to discern the construction.



These dovetails, although regular in appearance, all have slightly different angles. This suggests Fisher cut these by eye, without a dovetail maker or template.

side a single track and consider my findings from these three perspectives.

Although no one of us is expert in all three, I have dabbled in each and have found a comfortable spot straddling these three spheres. Some woodworkers I've met (but not all) think history is boring and irrelevant. They want to create while unfettered by tradition, to express themselves without reference to their heritage. What they lose in their isolation, however, is the mooring that gives our work meaning.

To be fair, though, history is too often done in such a way that there is no "take home" benefit. When there is no effort to help the reader see the impact the lives of our ancestors should have on us, there is considerable loss. History is not an end in itself. It is an interpretation of the past that enables us to remember who we are and where we came from. We should be better for having read it.



The grain painting on the reproduction card table was somewhat of an exercise in experimental archaeology, using only the kinds of tools and materials available to Fisher.



The workmanlike surfaces inside this desk and bookcase door show us each pass of the plane, which can be read almost like the brushstrokes of a painter.

As I've spent countless hours on my back under tables with a flashlight, examining tool marks and construction, I feel like I've gotten to know Fisher in a way that I probably wouldn't have even if I met him in person. Examining the minutia of tool marks shows much about the maker's mindset. It is like the way the brush strokes of master painters reveal their philosophy, culture and even their personal idiosyncrasies. Curator of prints at New York Public Library, Karl Kupp, described Fisher's engraving skill this way, "Fisher's style of engraving, in the manner of the typical primitive, shows the lack of training. But it is made up by a most fervent desire to please, and by an almost child-like persistence to get that animal upon the wood block, come what may. His modeling is poor, that we must admit; ... his proportions of drawing are not always right. But in the handling of the tool ... Fisher shows real feeling for the wood block and real craftsmanship in the execution of his engraving. He knows no fear in flicking out small bits to get the texture of either fur or feathers."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Chase, Mary Ellen, *Jonathan Fisher: Maine Parson 1768-1847*, The MacMillan Co., 1948, p 231.



This panel was hastily beveled to fit into the groove of this door.

I have found the same kind of analysis is possible through examination of the tool marks in his furniture. When dovetails appear regular, even though close measurement suggests they were cut without a template, we learn how picky he was for detail. On the other hand, from a macro perspective, the lack of opulent ornamentation and restrained sense of design testifies to his conservative and religious world view (although his artistic whimsy and playfulness emerges in the desk he made for his children). Even if unconsciously, Fisher left behind tool marks that function as permanent inscriptions of his multifaceted personality and values.

This level of scrutiny leaves a craftsman awkwardly exposed because it reveals many of the parson's imperfections. Getting to know Fisher in this way is, at times, uncomfortably intimate. Were we to have met him in person, the formalities and social graces surely would have buffered us from getting the "warts and all" look at the man. (We all do this, do we not?) But when we look at the inside of some of the utilitarian furniture he made, it's there that we see what he's like when not for show.

Period cabinetwork (much like today) was focused on the presentation surfaces. The undersides were left coarse because the 18th- and early 19th-century American economy did not support further refinement of such irrelevant areas. Accordingly, market expectations were such that no one thought twice about tear-out or riving marks on the underside. And certainly, no maker ever thought these surfaces would be photographed and published broadly.

In period work, almost every step of the construction process can still be read on the "secondary" surfaces (the undersides and insides). To be able to know the order of assembly, the direction of planing and the radius of the curve of the cutting iron is all information that tells us about who this artisan was and what their

world was like. Because of the instructive value of reading these surfaces, this book pays particular attention to the guts of Fisher's furniture. In this book, you will see warts and all.

The danger of emphasizing these surfaces here could leave the casual reader thinking poorly of Fisher's craftsmanship. But quality of workmanship needs to be determined contextually. It's not fair to compare Fisher's work with today's post-Industrial-Revolution standards. The question we should be asking ourselves is, "How does Fisher's work compare to that of other makers serving similar rural 19th-century markets?" The answer is that Fisher's work, as rough as it may be, was par-for-the-course. This might be one of the most important things we can learn from Fisher. Allowing coarse secondary surfaces not only allows us to work efficiently, but it is an opportunity to leave behind our "fingerprints" in the tool textures.

So be kind, reader. To a craftsman, this is like opening their underwear drawer. Know that Fisher never intended these artifacts to be intimately known. As you read this story and examine these photographs, imagine someone 200 years from now publishing detailed analysis of your work. If you're like me, the vulnerability of that potential is unnerving.

May you find inspiration in these pages, reader. Welcome to the strange yet familiar world of Jonathan Fisher.



This early 20th-century photograph of the Fisher house reminds me of the importance of discovering our past. Having spent so much time doing research in this house, I've found that when we take time to engage with our heritage, we can learn more about our own unique place in the world. — JONATHAN FISHER MEMORIAL.



# The Infant Part of the Country

*Every tick reminded him of his death.*

*It wasn't so much the steady rhythm of the clock that bothered him as he worked, though. It was its relentlessness. He shuffled past the ticking to reach for the next board. After examining it for twists and cupping, Fisher placed the piece on the workbench and slid it into the planing stop pegs, just as his uncle had taught. At first, the curved iron of the fore plane only grazed the weathered and ratty fibers, but it wasn't long before he was making deep gouging tracks down the length of the stock. The ripping sound of each pass echoed off the walls of the barn as he worked. And even though the dense smell of pine permeated the air, he couldn't smell it anymore. His entire life was enshrouded in timber. His clothes reeked of wood, his sweat was tinged with the stuff, and by this point in the project, he could even taste it.*

*Shavings covered the floor because it had been weeks since he'd really swept up. He knew that pretty soon, he had to set things in order again — it was driving him crazy. But he couldn't stop. He was so close to finishing.*

*It had only been a week since he set the clock a going, but after spending two years' worth of vacations from Harvard agonizing over the little wooden gears and fittings, finally his timepiece was complete. But it was bittersweet. On the one hand, he had obsessed over it until it became all he could think about. He'd bow his head to pray and the only thing in his mind was how to attach the pendulum. He was an idolater, a worshipper of the work of his own hands.*

*“During the week past I have been employed in mechanics; when that employment called my attention, my mind was very closely fixed upon it; thus far is well; but here is the mischief; when another employment, for instance, devotion, requires my attention, still my mind is fixed on mechanics. A proper government of my thoughts I have not yet acquired.”*

*As if the migraines weren't enough, Fisher knew well that each tick reminded him of the futility of his life. “What is your life, young man? Is it not a vapor? You do not know what a day may bring forth. Redeem the time because the days are evil.” He thought he had learned this lesson the fall previous while building the chock's works. He'd fought with that brass wheel. He'd wrangled the pendulum. After all the reading in the library, all the time spent drawing his own design for the works, all the futzing with tiny gears, he'd just about lost it when it didn't work. “Worked with little success upon my timepiece,” he'd written. “I have been long closely attached to certain worldly objects; I now meet with disappointment in them, which leads me to reflect that it is the hand of the Lord, exercised in order to wean me from them.”*

*Still, each pervasive tick pierced his conscience. He wondered what kind of minister he would make. Was he ready to serve the Lord? Weeks later, when the last back board was nailed into place and the bright red logwood dye was applied to the clock's case, Fisher knew he had created a monument. Its spinning hands would urge him to industry all the days of his life. It would remind him every hour, every minute to redeem the time — to employ his hands aright.*

*— August 1st, 1792*

### Childhood in Massachusetts

Fisher was born on Oct. 7, 1768, and spent the first nine years of his life in New Braintree, Mass. After the death of his father, a revolutionary war soldier, young Jonathan lived with his uncle, the Rev. Joseph Avery of Holden, Mass. Fisher recorded that he spent much time at his uncle's laboring on the farm and becoming "expert" with the axe. This practice in hard labor went in hand with a strong desire for a liberal education. Fisher recalled: "Between the years of 10 and 15 of my age I began to exhibit some traces of a mechanical genius, and a turn for mathematics; spending my leisure time in making buttons, broaches, windmills, snares, traps, puzzling sticks, and the like, and in solving various questions in mathematics" and said this led to "a small measure of proficiency in sketching and painting."



This postcard shows the Joseph Avery house in Holden, Mass., which is the house Fisher spent much of his childhood in. — JONATHAN FISHER MEMORIAL.



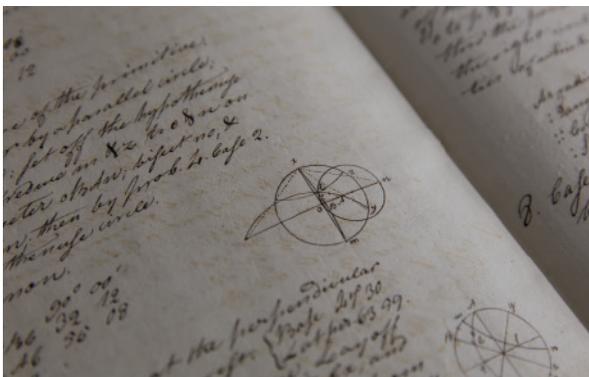
An 18th-century map of Massachusetts that shows Holden and Dedham in relation to Boston. — THE SIDNEY R. KNAFEL MAP COLLECTION AT PHILLIPS ACADEMY, ANDOVER.

Because the young Jonathan believed liberal education would be impossible, he considered alternative careers, “first to go to the blacksmith’s trade, then to the cabinetmaker’s and finally to the clockmaker’s trade. In

either of the last two mentioned I might no doubt have succeeded, but God had other employment for me.” Finally, though, at the encouragement of his mother, he determined to pursue his studies in preparation for a college education. Even as his childhood studies were “pleasant” and learned “with considerable ease,” he noted how “many intervals were stolen” in reading, geometry and “some mechanical employ.” This merger of rigorous mental exercise with hand craft work would come to typify the remainder of his life.

### His Harvard Years

One of Fisher’s fellow Harvard classmates described Fisher as “a quiet and peaceful student with a manner eccentric and odd.” Not much for light-hearted socializing, Fisher took his studies seriously and occasionally voiced irritation in his journal regarding fellow students who did not. His time at this conservative institution was foundational in his thinking for his entire life. As



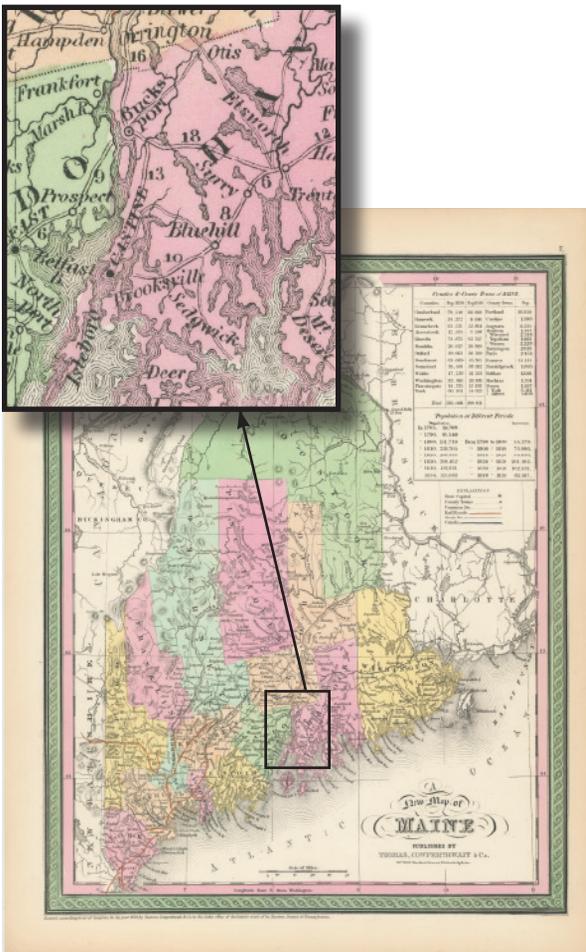
There are numerous notebooks of geometry exercises from Fisher’s studies at Harvard. – JONATHAN FISHER MEMORIAL.



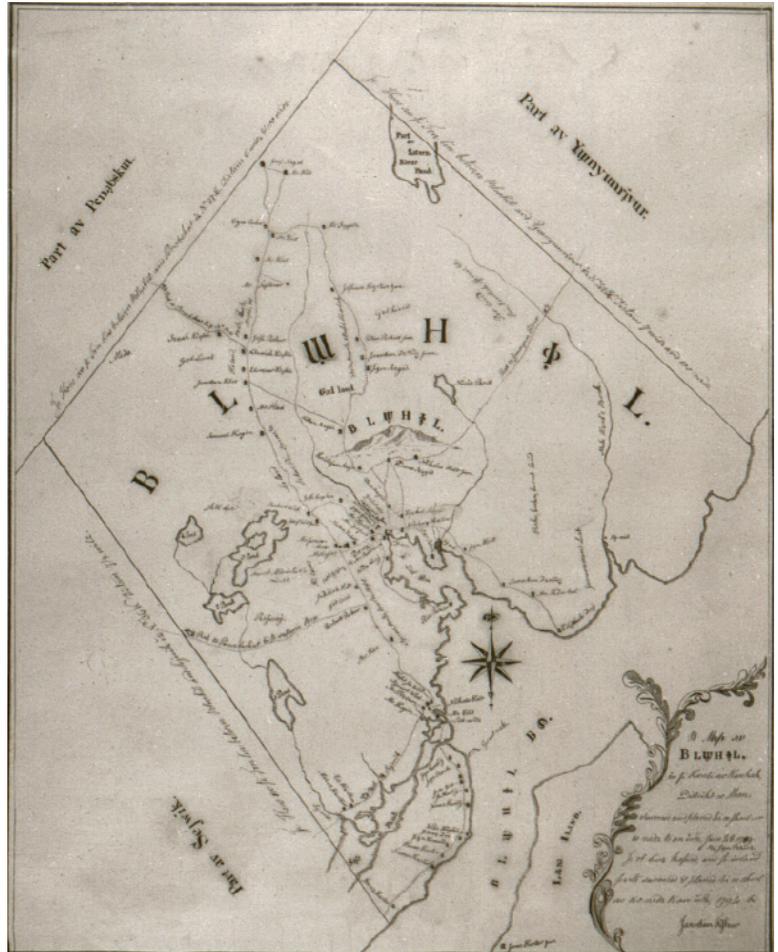
View of the college buildings: Hollis, Harvard and Massachusetts Halls, painted by Jonathan Fisher. – FISHER, JONATHAN. *HOLLIS, HARVARD, AND MASSACHUSETTS HALLS AT CAMBRIDGE, N. ENGLAND*, 1794. HUV 2194, OLVWORK671391. HARVARD UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES.



A morning view of Blue Hill, painted by Jonathan Fisher. – JONATHAN FISHER, *A MORNING VIEW OF BLUE HILL VILLAGE*, 1824, OIL ON CANVAS, 25-5/8" X 52-1/4", COLLECTION OF THE FARNSWORTH ART MUSEUM, ROCKLAND, MAINE; MUSEUM PURCHASE, 1965.1465.134.



A map of Maine. Note "Bluehill" in the pink "Hancock" region. – COURTESY OF MAPS OF ANTIQUITY.



Map of Blue Hill, 1794, after a survey by John Peters (1789), with landscape features labeled in Fisher's "Philosophical Alphabet." – JONATHAN FISHER, *MAP OF BLUE HILL*, 1794, PEN AND INK ON PAPER, 27-3/4" X 22-7/8", COLLECTION OF THE FARNSWORTH ART MUSEUM, ROCKLAND, MAINE; MUSEUM PURCHASE, 1965.1465.151.

one writer has said, “In the developing industrial age he remained, temperamentally and by training, a man of the eighteenth-century ... The college education he acquired in his twenties developed his tastes and expanded his horizon; it also established standards that he clung to all his life.”<sup>1</sup>

### Life in Blue Hill

After graduation, Fisher married Dolly Battle of Dedham, Mass., and accepted a call to minister to the frontier town of Blue Hill in the District of Maine. Situated about halfway up the Maine coast, Blue Hill is the subject of many idyllic landscape paintings. The jagged and rocky shoreline, salty ocean air and lush forests have long attracted tourists looking to get away from city life.

As welcome a vacation spot as midcoast Maine is today, in the first half of the 19th century it was inhospitable frontier wilderness. Between the notoriously recalcitrant populace and the lack of resources, the isolated frontier was a daunting mission. Kevin Murphy described Blue Hill in the 1790s as “a clutch of rude dwellings surrounded by some rickety tidal mills.”<sup>2</sup> The benefits of serving in a well-established town were not lost on Fisher. Before accepting the call to rural Blue Hill, he also considered a pastorate in Ashby, Mass., “in the heart of a well settled country,” which offered closer proximity to family, better compensation, assistance from fellow ministers and more “temporal conveniences.” For a Harvard-trained minister, the allure of urban ministry was real. Despite this temptation, Fisher felt a divine call to serve in this frontier setting – the “infant part of the country” – because “it [was] difficult for them to find a sufficient number of candidates, who [were] willing even to come and preach among them, and much less to settle.”<sup>3</sup> As one man said, “We are so as it wore out of the wourld that we don’t hardly know wether we do rite or rong but we mean to do as well as we can.”<sup>4</sup>

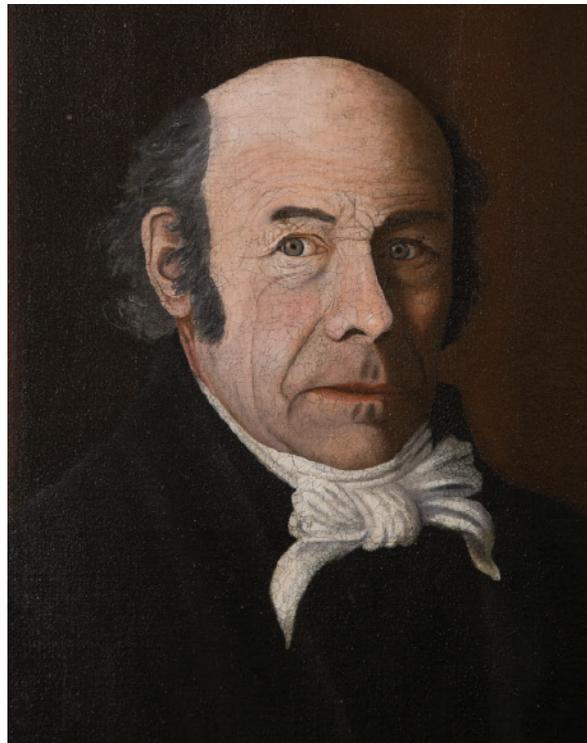
1 Winchester, Alice, *Versatile Yankee: The Art of Jonathan Fisher, 1768-1847*, Pyne Press, 1973, p 28.

2 Murphy, Kevin D., *Jonathan Fisher of Blue Hill, Maine: Commerce, Culture, and Community on the Eastern Frontier*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2010, p 3.

3 Letter to Ashby from Fisher, October 26, 1795.

4 Harding, Samuel B., *The Contest over the Ratification of the Federal Constitution in the State of Massachusetts*, New York: Longmans-Green, 1896, p 8, quoted in Banks, Ronald F., *Maine Becomes a State: The Movement to Separate Maine from Massachusetts, 1785-1820*, New Hampshire Publishing Co.; Wesleyan/Maine Historical Society, 1973, 4, p 9.

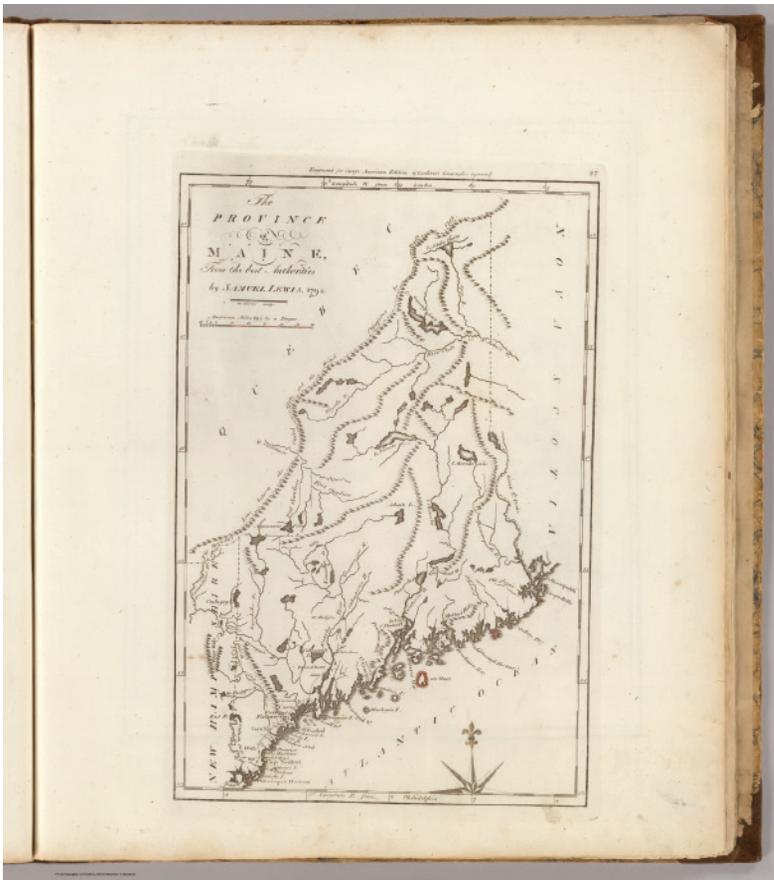
Late 19th-century Blue Hill historian, R.G.F. Candage, recalled: “In personal appearance Father Fisher was below medium height; he dressed in ancient style, with small clothes, knee buckles and shoes, and a long waisted coat, his head bald and thrown slightly forward, with his whole demeanor and appearance clerical and grave; no one could see him and doubt his



Detail of Self Portrait. – JONATHAN FISHER MEMORIAL.



Fisher’s letters to family members are full of warmth and piety.



The Province of Maine from the best authorities, Samuel Lewis, 1794, W. Barker sculp., engraved for Mathew Carey's American edition of Guthrie's *Geography Improved*. — COURTESY, DAVID RUMSEY MAP COLLECTION, DAVID RUMSEY MAP CENTER, STANFORD LIBRARIES, [HTTPS://PURL.STANFORD.EDU/SR253BC9505](https://purl.stanford.edu/SR253BC9505).

profession.” This image of the publicly austere reverend concurs with other contemporary descriptions of him, but reading his journals and personal correspondence one can’t help but be impressed with his warmth and piety. Kevin Murphy’s assessment of Fisher’s demeanor concurs with my own: “Fisher’s public persona – serious, and probably overbearing and too exacting for his parishioners – overshadowed the private Fisher, who emerges from his letters and diaries and from the words of his family as sensitive, intelligent, and inspiring.”<sup>5</sup> Or as Mary Ellen Chase put it: “He mingled authority with love.”<sup>6</sup>

Jonathan Fisher’s life was far from easy. He regularly dealt with migraine headaches, stomach pains, diarrhea and serious injuries from manual labor. Despite these trials, Fisher resigned himself under the hand of Providence. Accounts such as that of August 28th, 1818, are common: “Came on for Bluehill exercised with pain in my side, back and bowels and with diarrhoea.

<sup>5</sup> Murphy, Kevin D., *Jonathan Fisher of Blue Hill, Maine: Commerce, Culture, and Community on the Eastern Frontier*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2010, p 13.

<sup>6</sup> Chase, Mary Ellen *Jonathan Fisher, Maine Parson 1768-1847*, The MacMillan Co., 1948, p 279.



As temporary structures, log cabins were quick to build and allowed frontier families to prepare the land for settlement. — MISSOURI HISTORY MUSEUM, ST. LOUIS.

Called at Phin. Osgood’s, Jr. Reached home 10 P.M. Took sop pills and mullein tea. Found the family well, except Josiah, wounded by an ax. Have reason to bless God that we are all yet spared in life, that we have so many comforts indulged us.” Even in the midst of debilitating physical pain, Fisher carried on with the work at hand. On March 17, 1826, his journal reads, “High N.W. scattering clouds, cold. From 9 A.M. ‘till about 5 P.M. exercised with earache, some of the time severely. Tried first camphor on wool, then hot tobacco smoke, then had several drops of West Indian Rum dropped in. This in the first trial gave a little relief; in the second removed the severity of the pain. At intervals through the day planed out stuff for a common ruler, a pair of parallel rulers and modern dividers, finished the latter, A part of the time walked the room in great pain. It is easy to bear pain when we do not feel it, but when it is acute, then to bear it with patience is something.” He was a resilient man. Not owning a horse until late in his life, he was known to regularly travel long distances on foot, even as far as Bangor, 40 miles away.

Fisher’s most active furniture-making years were between 1796 (when he settled in Blue Hill) and 1820 (when he paid off all his home- and farm-building debt). The years between the Revolutionary War and 1820 (when Maine achieved statehood) were formative years for the new nation. This was especially true for the “easternmost countries” of Massachusetts, which were then called the District of Maine. Maine’s struggle for independence during these years can be seen as a “microcosm of the larger quest for national identity.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Clarke, Charles E.; Leamon, James S. and Bowden, Karen, *Maine in the Early Republic*, Maine Historical Society and Maine Humanities Council, 1988, p 12.



This 1802 overmantel from a Paris, Maine, house illustrates well the stages of settlement: Clearing forest, building a house frame and the establishing of a village center. “View from Paris Hill” in the Lazarus Hathaway House. — “THE CLEARING OF PARIS HILL.” OIL ON PINE BOARD, 30" X 48", ARTIST UNKNOWN. OVERMANTEL FROM THE LAZARUS HATHAWAY HOUSE, PARIS HILL, 1802. COURTESY OF THE HAMLIN MEMORIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM. PHOTOGRAPH BY BRANDAN ROBERTS.

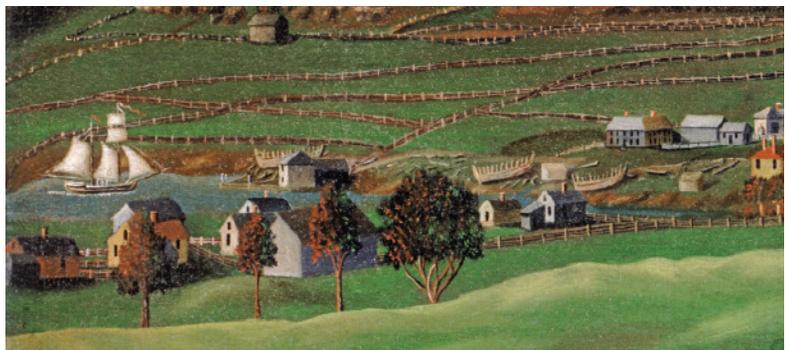
Politically, demographically and socially, the District of Maine had been an “outpost” of Massachusetts since the late 17th century.

Maine derived most of its cultural influence from Boston in the same way that Bostonians looked to London for the latest fashions. Despite this deep-rooted “Boston prestige” during Fisher’s life, Maine was developing an identity apart from Massachusetts. It is not surprising, then, that Maine’s art during the Federal era often reflects this emerging sense of identity, blending vernacular/folk traditions with the sophistication of academic training.

### Maine’s Growth

After the Revolutionary War, Maine’s population dramatically increased from 56,000 to 300,000 (a 435 percent increase) by 1820. Looking for a haven after years of bloody war, many New Englanders headed up the eastern frontier to start anew. Fortunately, they found the indigenous Passamaquoddy and Penobscot tribes were relatively peaceful and welcoming to settlers.

Despite the lack of native resistance, the mission of settling the “untamed wilderness” dominated the minds and hands of Mainers. Land clearing, house building and crop planting took years of intense labor to achieve. The gathering of firewood alone was almost enough to exhaust New Englanders throughout the



In the far left of his painting, Fisher painted Blue Hill shipwrights working on three vessels at the head of the bay. Meanwhile, a schooner sails into the bay, likely delivery goods “from the westward.” — JONATHAN FISHER, *A MORNING VIEW OF BLUE HILL VILLAGE*, 1824, OIL ON CANVAS, 25-5/8" X 52-1/4", COLLECTION OF THE FARNSWORTH ART MUSEUM, ROCKLAND, MAINE; MUSEUM PURCHASE, 65.1465.134.

long winters. Fisher’s journal has innumerable entries that mention “cutting wood at the door,” usually beginning about November and continuing through March. Between their heat and cooking needs, an average-sized New England house consumed upwards of 20 cords of firewood per year. Even at this, period accounts record fires roaring in the hearth while water freezes in the same room.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Nylander, Jane C., *Our Own Snug Fireside: Images of the New England Home, 1760-1860*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, p 75-76.

Many Maine towns were established at rivers' falls to accommodate mills for grinding grain and sawing lumber. The typical settlement pattern was to build temporary log cabins that were inhabited seasonally until sufficient land was cleared for their building and agricultural needs. At that point, a larger and more refined home was built, frequently attached to the original frame.

Despite the romantic picture of New England "nucleated" villages clustered around the meeting house, rural Mainers lived with a bit more breathing room "on scattered farms, conducted most local economic transactions in these dispersed places, and traveled on the Sabbath to nearly isolated geographic centers for their public and religious activities."<sup>9</sup> Their houses were usually either the one-story "Cape Cod" style or one-and-a-half stories, one or two rooms deep, with a central chimney.

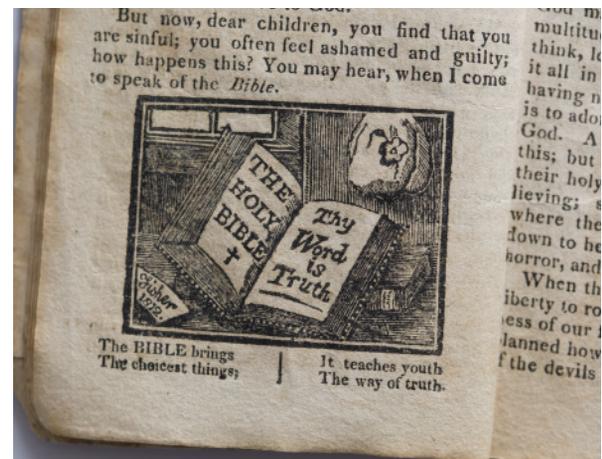
Most Mainers (especially those of Blue Hill) were farmers, lumbermen or were involved in the maritime trades. Although fishing and shipbuilding were important for Maine, they paled in comparison to lumbering. Maine shipped lumber down the American East Coast as well as to the West Indies and Europe. Large pine trees were cut for ship masts and boards, while oak (and other hardwoods) were harvested for shipbuilding. Spruce and hemlock were also used locally as alternatives to pine, but only for less-important carpentry needs.

Manufactured goods from Europe, plus sugar, molasses and rum from the West Indies, arrived in the large ports of Boston, and were in turn shipped up the coast in schooners to smaller ports such as Blue Hill. This "triangle trade" relied on the sea as a highway to the rest of the world. Without an expansive roadway, travel was easier aboard sailing vessels than it was through the woods on horseback.

### Maine's Religious Climate

The legally established religion in Federal-era Maine was Congregationalism. Ministers were paid by the town through taxes, and many towns had a meeting house, a parsonage and a Harvard-trained minister. The minister's role in the town was to instruct and maintain religious fidelity. Called to lead by example, they were expected to "embody the ideal Christian life of traditional New England,"<sup>10</sup> no doubt a heavy burden.

<sup>9</sup> Clarke, Charles E.; Leamon, James S. and Bowden, Karen, *Maine in the Early Republic*, Maine Historical Society and Maine Humanities Council, 1988, p 28.



A Woodcut from the Youth's Primer, written and illustrated by Jonathan Fisher. — JONATHAN FISHER MEMORIAL.

The Congregationalist world view can be summarized from the Westminster Confession of Faith as such: "There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection ... [who did] by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass ... [Humanity] fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin ... [and] hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation ... [By] the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts ... the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls ... not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins ... by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them." The Westminster Larger Catechism tells us "Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever."

Conservative Congregationalism began to lose its influence during the first decades of the 19th century. In Hancock County, Congregationalist churches only grew from six to nine between 1800 and 1820. When contrasted with the Separate Baptists' growth from one church to 21 churches, the impact of this religious shift was obvious. A product of the Second Great Awakening, the Separate Baptists challenged the authority of the Congregational Church. By refusing to pay taxes to fund the minister's salary and causing disruption in the theology of the church, many Congregational ministers struggled to maintain influence over their communities. Fisher's experience was no exception. In 1800,

<sup>10</sup> Clarke, Charles E.; Leamon, James S. and Bowden, Karen, *Maine in the Early Republic*, Maine Historical Society and Maine Humanities Council, 1988, p 121.

he recorded 36 members (approximately one-third) of his congregation had “withdrawn to [the] Baptists.”

His unswerving commitment to the doctrine of predestination was not appreciated by everyone. “I have hints that my preaching is not fashionable enough and that I am too strenuous for the doctrine of Election,” he recorded in his journals. Although Fisher’s dogged conservatism was a source of encouragement for him and his family, the loss of these parishioners was a blow.

### Fisher’s Legacy

At his death in 1847, Father Fisher was regarded as a pillar of the community. Surrounded by his family and friends, he “depart[ed] hence” leaving a rich and multifaceted legacy of spiritual fervor, intellectual aptitude and relentless productivity.

Fisher was a model of hard work and ingenuity. The furniture he made was one of the many ways he supplemented his modest ministerial salary to build a

comfortable life in the frontier. Between the carpentry, surveying, hat making, book writing, painting and much more, Fisher beautified the world around him to provide for his family.



The preservation of Fisher’s tools is a testament to the multifaceted impact he had on his community.

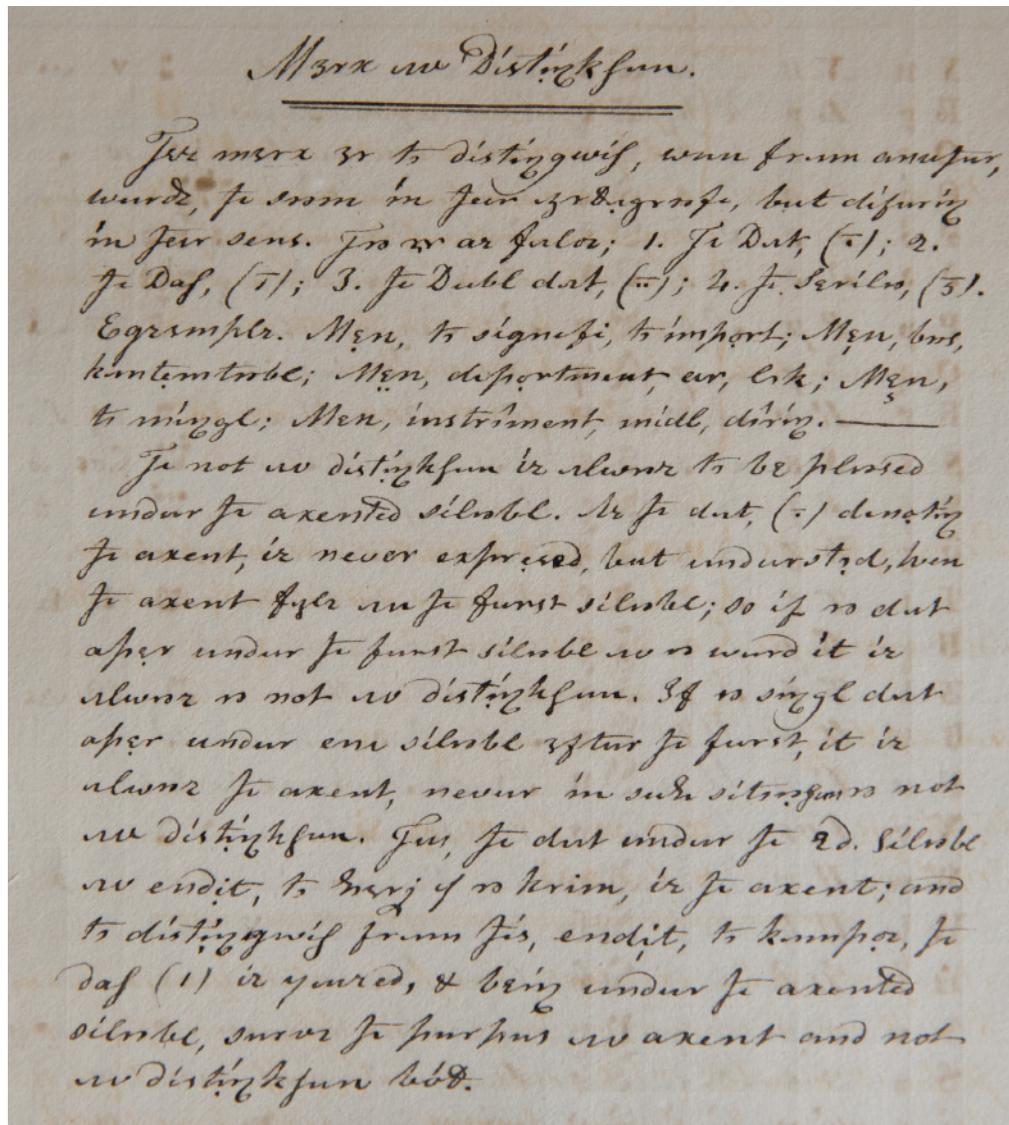


The house Fisher built in 1814 stands today as a monument to his legacy in Blue Hill. The tool marks left behind tell us the story of this Renaissance man.

In the 1950s, the Jonathan Fisher Memorial Inc., purchased the long-vacant house, developing it into a museum to display his paintings, tools and furniture, many of which are on loan from the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine. Though Fisher exhibited an unusual degree of talent in the things he did, the most remarkable aspect of his legacy is the vastness of surviving objects. Not only are many of the parson's furniture pieces extant, but so are the tools, workbenches and lathe he used to build them.

From 1790 to 1835, Fisher recorded his daily activities, such as where he went, what work he accomplished and occasionally his thoughts and observations of the day's events. All of this was written in a phonetic shorthand he developed at Harvard. Linguist Raoul

Smith has analyzed this shorthand extensively. A local newspaper clipping in the Fisher house archives tells us about the significance of the code: "Fisher, when he wrote in his code, indicated the phonetic value of each symbol, which makes his work unique in literature. ... His alphabet had 47 symbols. It had 23 consonants, plus two symbols used for consonants used in sequence. It had 15 vowels and two semivowels and five diphthongs. ... Fisher really captures 18th Century pronunciation. ... He articulated 't' and 'd' in such words as 'election' and 'Indian.' He eschewed the 'Tch' and 'dj' sounds in the words containing 't' and 'd.' 'Statue' and 'nature' come out with a hard 't.' He used old country pronunciation for words such as 'deaf' and 'dead,' which come out 'deef' and 'deed.' 'Drain' comes out as 'dreen' in



Without the code for translation provided by Fisher, all 40 years of his journals would be unintelligible and his story would likely have gone untold. — JONATHAN FISHER MEMORIAL.



The backs of most of his casepieces are completely unplanned, showing the up-and-down sash saw marks.

Fisher's code, which would jar some modern ears ... Fisher's speech is a mixture. It tells us that he was a rather urbane gentleman, that he traveled and that he knew many people."<sup>11</sup> This "Philosophical Alphabet," as he called it, was taken up as an economical measure – at the end of his life he estimated that he saved \$70 on paper this way. Without his small "code" book, the shorthand is completely unintelligible. Fisher once wondered "if some day my grandchildren will amuse themselves by attempting to read it." He would, no doubt, be surprised to learn that in the mid-20th century, Blue Hill resident Edith Chase Weren would take up the task of translating and typing the four decades of entries. It is these journals that provide us with a rare window into the productive life of this unique individual and, without her work, this research would never have been possible.

The journal entries are significant for their commonness. Everyday events were faithfully documented. Weather records, ministerial visits, books read, as well as his farm and shop work are all recorded in comprehensive mundanity. Excavating a coherent narrative from the journals was a task that could only be accomplished alongside the surviving objects. As consistent

<sup>11</sup> Wiggins, John R., "Parson Fisher's 'Funny Pronunciations' Show Up Alive and Kicking in Blue Hill", *The Ellsworth American*, August 25, 1984.



This secret compartment hangs underneath the writing surface of his desk. Its fineness of execution is surprising to find next to the rough sawn boards nailed to the back of the desk.

as the entries are, the lack of detail can, at times, be frustrating to insatiable researchers.

*"January 1807...*

*28. Warm and rainy. Worked on picture frame ¼ day = 9. Turned chair rounds.*

*29. Turned chair rounds and posts. Ground tools, etc.*

*30. Finished ready for painting a little chair.*

*P.M. went to Mr. Nicholas Holt and wife. Stopped in the evening at Mr. Phineas Osgood's.*

*31. Wrote a sermon."*

Rarely, there are projects which merited more particular attention, such as a chest of drawers Fisher worked on in December 1807:

*10th: "...P.M. primed inside of sleigh and chest of drawers for Hannah Parker."*

*17th: "A.M. put locks and hinges on Hannah Parker's chest of drawers. P.M. painted it a second time and painted knapsack and inside of sleigh."*

*18th: "Painted Hannah Parker's chest..."*

*29th: "Put trimmings on Hannah Parker's chest and carried it home."*

*30th: "Received of Hannah Parker for painting chest of drawers, etc. \$1"*

The overwhelming body of artifacts in the collections of the Jonathan Fisher House and the Farnsworth Art Museum unlock the story of this previously unstudied furniture maker. Examining in person the economy of construction in his use of rough sawn and completely unplanned material for backboards partially explains the speed with which he made his furniture. What you don't see in the journals, however, is Fisher's penchant for precision in surprising and seemingly insignificant areas. Studying these contradictory features with an aim to synthesize them with the tool marks he left behind fills out the complex picture of Fisher as a furniture maker.