



Living history

By Laura Beach

Photography by Gavin Ashworth

A New England couple reanimates the past with a collection decades in the making

As suggested intriguingly by a small oil portrait on copper that surfaced publicly in 2006 after more than half a century off the market and out of view, the man said to be James Tilley enjoyed expansive views. England and its rooted traditions lay behind him. Ahead, beckoning, was the unsettled promise of America (Fig. 10). But Tilley died indebted in New London, Connecticut, while the painter whose name is affixed to the work, John Singleton Copley, decamped to London and further acclaim in 1774.

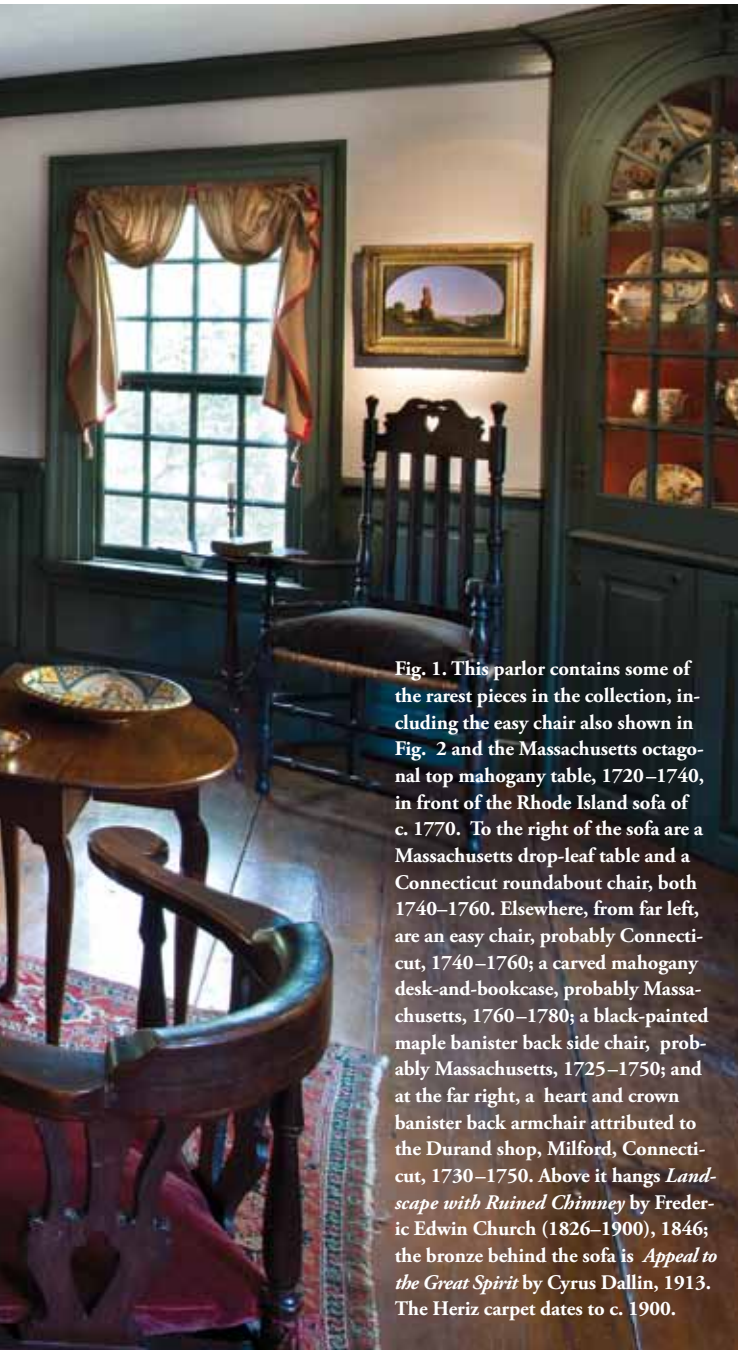


Fig. 1. This parlor contains some of the rarest pieces in the collection, including the easy chair also shown in Fig. 2 and the Massachusetts octagonal top mahogany table, 1720–1740, in front of the Rhode Island sofa of c. 1770. To the right of the sofa are a Massachusetts drop-leaf table and a Connecticut roundabout chair, both 1740–1760. Elsewhere, from far left, are an easy chair, probably Connecticut, 1740–1760; a carved mahogany desk-and-bookcase, probably Massachusetts, 1760–1780; a black-painted maple banister back side chair, probably Massachusetts, 1725–1750; and at the far right, a heart and crown banister back armchair attributed to the Durand shop, Milford, Connecticut, 1730–1750. Above it hangs *Landscape with Ruined Chimney* by Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), 1846; the bronze behind the sofa is *Appeal to the Great Spirit* by Cyrus Dallin, 1913. The Heriz carpet dates to c. 1900.



Fig. 2. The turned maple easy chair with Spanish feet, Boston, that descended in the Doggett family belongs to a small group of such chairs, other examples of which are in the collections of the Winterthur Museum, the Chipstone Foundation, and Colonial Williamsburg. Above the chair, left, is a mahogany wall clock with silver dial by Simon Willard (1753–1848), 1770–1790 and, right, *Fruit and Nuts in a Bowl* by Raphaelle Peale (1774–1825). On the Norwich, Connecticut, candlestand, 1740–1760, is a silver sweetmeat tazza, London, 1619.

Fig. 3. Charles I circular basket by Richard Blackwell I (active 1624–1640), London, c. 1625. Silver, pierced and chased; height $4\frac{3}{4}$, width 12 inches. Engraved, probably c. 1700, with the marshalled coat of arms of Waldyve Willington (1677–1733), later High Sheriff of Warwickshire, on the occasion of his marriage to Martha, daughter of Richard Harvey. Until the discovery of this example, only three pre-Restoration silver baskets were known.

Writ small or large, New England's dual and sometimes contradictory past is at the heart of this distinguished collection combining American furniture, paintings, and sporting art with English silver and tin-glazed earthenware, much of it dating to the eighteenth century or earlier. With deep ties to the Connecticut River Valley, the couple who gathered the treasures shown here set to work nearly a half century ago, object by object fashioning a spirited account of their own history and that of a region they call home.



Fig. 4. The couple collects seven-teenth- and eighteenth-century English silver to complement American furniture of the same period. In the hall, a Boston mahogany side table of c. 1740–1750 supports wine cups made for the London Coachmaker’s Company by Edward Wimans, 1703 (left), and Edmund Pearce, 1711 (right), flanking a silver monteith by John Leach, London, 1705, and a pair of tazzas by David Tanqueray, London, 1719. Dispatched to Paris by President James K. Polk in the mid-nineteenth century, the wife’s ancestor acquired the oil on canvas above, attributed to a follower of the Dutch painter Philips Wouwerman (1619–1668). The mahogany side chair at the left is Philadelphia, c. 1760.

Facing page, clockwise from top left: Fig. 5. In the front parlor is a cherry high chest of drawers with steps, Colchester or Hebron, Connecticut, 1760–1780, that descended in the original family until acquired by the couple. *Marshes and Hay Mounds*, signed by Martin Johnson Heade (1819–1904), 1871–1875, hangs above a New England cherry armchair, 1740–1760, and a cherry candlestand with drawer, Connecticut, 1760–1770. On the candlestand are an English silver tobacco box of 1691 and a silver candlestick, London, 1721.

Fig. 6. *Catskill Landscape* by Thomas Cole (1801–1848), 1846, hangs above a mantel in the front parlor on which stands a pair of Chinese style faience vases from the Nevers manufactory, France, c. 1680. On the c. 1750–1780 Rhode Island maple porringer-top tea table is the English delftware plate shown in Fig. 17.

Fig. 7. An interior view signed by James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) hangs above a veneered walnut dressing table, Boston, 1710–1730, formerly in the collection of Eric Martin Wunsch. On the dressing table, from left, are a delft hand warmer shaped like a book, London, probably Southwark, dated 1665 and initialed “B./I.E.”; a delft jug with armorial decoration, London, 1699; and a Charles II silver covered bowl, London, 1679.

Fig. 8. Bonnet-top high chest of drawers, probably Colchester or Hebron, Connecticut, 1770–1795. Inscribed “July 4, 1791” in chalk on backboard. Cherry; height 84, width 38 ¼, depth 19 ¼ inches.



With deep ties to the Connecticut River Valley, the couple who gathered these treasures have fashioned a spirited account of their own history and that of the region they call home

As the wife explains, “This is who we are and where we came from.”

In the early 1960s the husband, an investor, acquired a weekend retreat in Old Lyme, Connecticut, where the Connecticut River empties into Long Island Sound. He wanted to furnish the eighteenth-century house, a center-chimney colonial, in a sympathetic fashion. By instinct a hunter, he made his way down the coast one day to Ansonia, Connecticut, where he found a rare foliate-painted high chest of drawers of a type associated with the shore-

line Connecticut communities of Guilford and Saybrook (Fig. 11). After an obligatory tussle, dealer Harry Arons agreed grudgingly to sell the early eighteenth-century case piece. It has remained with the husband, a souvenir of his journey.

Still unknown to him, his future wife had also fallen under the spell of the old and beautiful. “My great aunt and her husband had put together a fantastic collection. I visited their wonderful house almost every day when I was a girl and it made a tremendous impression on me,” she

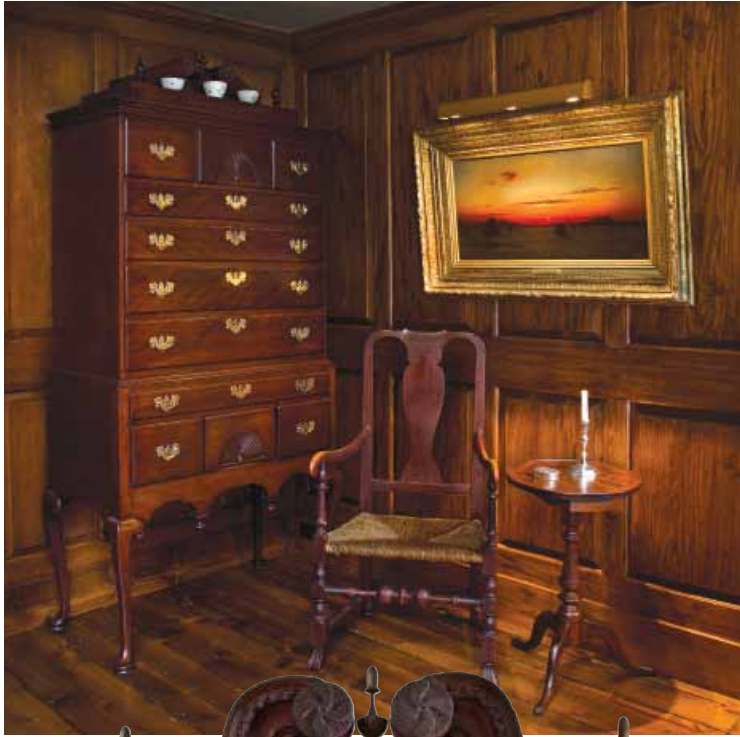


Fig. 9. In the kitchen hangs a c. 1650 portrait that possibly depicts Penelope Pelham (1630–1703), who married Massachusetts Bay Colony governor Josiah Winslow in 1651. It and a pendant likeness of a man believed to be her brother Nathaniel Pelham (1632–1657), both once owned by Katharine Prentis Murphy (1882–1969), inspired the couple to collect seventeenth-century silver, ceramics, and furniture. The maple and ash turned great chair is attributed to Ephraim Tinkham II (1649–1713) of Plymouth County, Massachusetts, 1675–1700. The joinery of the walnut chest of drawers, also 1675–1700, exemplifies the London style found in Boston in the late seventeenth century. On it are an English bible box of carved elm, 1650–1700, and a smaller chip-carved pine slide box, New England, dated 1785 and initialed “A.H.” The Bidjar carpet dates to the late nineteenth century.

Facing page: Fig. 10. Said to depict James Tilley, this oil on copper portrait (13 ¾ by 10 ½ inches) by John Singleton Copley (1738–1815) is signed and dated “I.S.Copley pinx. 1757.” It has a well documented history of descent from the early nineteenth century, when it was in the collection of journalist William Coleman (1766–1829), to its sale in 2006 as part of the collection of Mrs. J. Insley Blair.

Fig. 11. This paint-decorated high chest of drawers made in Saybrook, Connecticut, c. 1720, was among the first antiques acquired by the husband.



says. She graduated from candlesticks to candlestands as finances allowed and still buys pieces with her family's provenance when they surface.

Once married, the couple looked for a place to call their own. They found an early nineteenth-century farmhouse up the river and set about restoring it. Colchester, Connecticut, dealer Arthur Liverant, who advises them, recalls visiting the understated property decades ago—before the old potting shed became a new kitchen, and the old kitchen, a new dining room. About ten years ago, the couple commissioned a talented architect to add a sequence of rooms that, through clever sleight of hand, conjures early New England. In an imaginative flourish, they built backward, adding a late eighteenth-century bed chamber, an early eighteenth-century parlor, and a seventeenth-century tavern room.

"No Tory furniture for us. We wanted to live with simple, quirky New England things," say the couple,



them a cherry flat-top high chest of drawers with its original china steps that was probably made in Hebron or Colchester, Connecticut, between 1760 and 1780 (Fig. 5). To their delight, construction details suggest that the piece is from the same shop as an imposing cherry bonnet-top chest-on-chest acquired years ago from Arons (Fig. 8). The latter, as described by Thomas

P. and Alice K. Kugelman in *Connecticut Valley Furniture*, shows the influence of Windsor, Connecticut, cabinetmaker Eliphalet Chapin in the distinctive intertwined vine carving that decorates its top drawer.

Dating to the first quarter of the eighteenth century, a William and Mary easy chair with shaped crest,

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who gathered emblematic forms from Wethersfield and Windsor, Connecticut, and from Hadley and Taunton, Massachusetts. They acquired candlestands in felicitous variety.

In an upstairs bedroom, a joined, carved, and painted oak one-drawer sunflower chest of about 1675 to 1710 survives in nearly pristine condition, much of its old surface and original paint intact. Possibly from the Wethersfield area shop of émigré craftsman Peter Blin, it previously belonged to the New York collector Eric Martin Wunsch, whose name also attaches to a 1710 to 1730 veneered walnut Boston dressing table with a cross-stretcher base in the front parlor (Fig. 7). Of the latter, Christie's deputy chairman John Hays, a longtime friend, says, "It landed in the right collection. It is one of the great surviving William and Mary dressing tables." He cites as virtues the beauty of the veneered case, the shape of its apron, and the emphatic turnings of the legs.

The couple was thrilled when Liverant offered





Fig. 12. In a sitting room, two highlights from an extensive collection of decoys and decorative carvings by Anthony Elmer Crowell (1862–1952) of East Harwich, Massachusetts, are, left center, a preening pintail drake made c.1900–1910 for Harry V. Long (1857–1949) of Cohasset, Massachusetts; and, rear left, a full-size curlew with lifted wing, 1900–1925. The inlaid mahogany shelf clock is by David Wood (1766–1855), Newburyport, Massachusetts, 1795–1815. *Ruffed Grouse*, a signed watercolor by Frank Weston Benson (1862–1951), 1930, hangs above two Hudsonian curlews and a wood duck on the mantel, all by Crowell, 1900–1925. To the right of the fireplace are a standing wingspread widgeon by Ira Hudson, Chincoteague, Virginia, 1900–1925, and three Crowells, one of them, center, a reaching black duck of c. 1912. On the walls are, left, *Sioux Reconnoitering*, by Alfred Jacob Miller (1810–1874), c. 1860; and, right, *Going Out*, signed and dated 1860 by Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait (1819–1905). The banister-back side chair at the right is probably Massachusetts, 1725–1750.

“I got interested in decoys *in the 1960s* and today mostly buy birds by the Cape Cod carver A. Elmer Crowell. He is the Remington of duck sculpture.”

baluster turned stretchers, and Spanish feet is believed to be the only known example still in private hands (Fig. 2). “It is probably one of our three best pieces of furniture,” the husband says.

Another rare piece is an unusual mahogany table with a molded octagonal top and splayed block-and-ring turned legs (see Fig. 1). It dates to about 1720 to 1740 and is thought to have

descended in the Franklin family of Massachusetts.

The couple’s appreciation for the world of antiques extends to its storied figures, among them Katharine Prentis Murphy, a tastemaker who presented early New England rooms to several museums. Formerly on view at the New-York Historical Society—thanks to Murphy’s generosity—is a pair of portraits identified as Penelope Pelham of Plymouth, Massachusetts, and her brother Nathaniel that dates to about 1650 and hangs in the kitchen (see Fig. 9). “These portraits inspired us to collect silver and ceramics of the same period,” says the wife, pleased to imagine that John Singleton Copley, whose widowed mother married the portrait painter and engraver Peter Pelham, might have been distantly related by marriage to the brother and sister.



says O'Brien a specialty dealer and auctioneer, who helped assemble what he thinks may be, given its breadth and attention to quality, the best collection of Crowells anywhere. Commissioned by Harry V. Long, a preening pintail drake is one of many stars (visible in front of the shelf clock in Fig. 12). Considered a masterwork, it is closely related to a record-setting preening pintail drake made by Crowell for Dr. John C. Phillips around 1915.

The room also accommodates paintings by Alfred Jacob Miller and Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait from the couple's extensive holdings of views of the American West as well as watercolors of grouse by Frank Weston Benson, the Massachusetts-born painter and print-

Fig. 13. *Still Life of Watermelon and Grapes* by Raphaele Peale, c. 1823, hangs above an oak and white pine Hadley chest, Hampshire County, Massachusetts, c. 1715, carved with the initials "TB." Flanking a silver monteith in the James II style by Richard Comyus, London, 1933, and a wood-handled silver basting spoon by Benjamin Godfrey (active 1731–1741), London, 1734, is a pair of English glass decanters of c. 1715.

Also in the kitchen are two examples of late seventeenth-century Massachusetts furniture, a maple and ash turned great chair attributed to Ephraim Tinkham II of Plymouth County, and a sophisticated walnut Boston chest of drawers with London style joinery.

"I got interested in decoys in the 1960s and today mostly buy birds by the Cape Cod carver A. Elmer Crowell. He is the Remington of duck sculpture," the husband says, leading the way to a rustic sitting room (Fig. 12), a black Labrador retriever padding amiably alongside. A celebrated sportsman, the husband met Stephen O'Brien Jr. on a fishing trip in the Florida Keys nearly fifteen years ago. "It was a memorable day. As it turned out, we shared a passion for duck hunting and Crowell carvings,"



Fig. 14. *View of Norwich, Connecticut* by Fitz Henry Lane (1804–1865), 1849. Signed and dated “F.H. Lane 1849” at lower right. Oil on canvas, 12 ½ by 17 inches.

maker who, like Crowell, is considered a master of the genre.

“You can have all the furniture you want but it’s the accessories that count,” Lillian B. Cogan (1897–1991), the pioneering Connecticut antiques dealer who helped popularize what were called Pilgrim Century decorative arts, long ago advised the couple. Today their interiors sparkle with English silver, much of it made between 1625 and 1713. “For me, the marquee piece is a Charles I pierced cake basket by Richard Blackwell I that dates to about 1625,” says Timothy Martin of S. J. Shrubsole in New York (Fig. 3). “It has beautiful chasing, almost Elizabethan in feel, that singles it out. It’s just exquisite.”

Like any great collection, this one blends courage, care, and conviction. The couple indulges a passion for seventeenth-century English tin-glazed earthenware, or delftware, seeking signed, dated, or marked examples decorated with specific events or recognizable subjects by known decorators or potteries. Most of the pieces have exceptional provenances. When the Longridge Collection, formed over thirty years

Like the decorative arts in their collection, the couple’s paintings also speak to what is distinctly American



by Syd Levetan, came to market in 2010 and 2011, the couple stepped up to buy many of its top lots. Among the most spectacular is a dated charger that may have been made to commemorate the July 9, 1638, marriage of Aaron Wit and Frances Allen at Saint George the Martyr in Southwark (Fig. 17). The distant past is rarely more tangible.

“There are other private American collections that are larger and more diverse, but for seventeenth-century English tin-glazed earthenware this is the best I’ve seen. Every work is a masterpiece of form or decoration,” says Luke Beckerdite, who, with London dealer Garry Atkins, advises the couple.



Fig. 15. An upstairs bedchamber, a recent addition, is furnished with a joined, carved, and painted oak one-drawer sunflower chest (ex Wunsch collection) possibly by the Wethersfield, Connecticut, area shop tradition of Peter Blin (c. 1640-1725), 1675-1710. On it is an English delft punch bowl initialed and dated "GB/1715," Bristol or London. Also visible are a cherry couch, Connecticut, c. 1740 (on the left); a walnut veneered high chest of drawers, Connecticut or Massachusetts, c. 1750; and a banister-back armchair, Connecticut, c. 1720. The linen and crewel embroidered pictorial coverlet on the bed is signed by Elizabeth Hulett (1810-1839) of Byron, Genesee County, New York, 1825-1835. The carpet is a nineteenth-century Tabriz.

Like the decorative arts in their collection, the couple's paintings also speak to what is distinctly American, in the main progressing from Raphaelle Peale's intimate arrangements of fruit and nuts (see Figs. 2, 13) to untamed views of land and sea by Frederic Edwin Church, Thomas Cole, Fitz Henry Lane (Fig. 14), Jasper Francis Cropsey, Martin Johnson Heade, and William Bradford. "So many people are buying contemporary art but we stayed away from it. We wanted a harmonious arrangement of paintings, furniture, and objects," the wife says. In the lower hall, Andrew Wyeth's *The Milk Room* of 1964 hangs near a two-drawer oak Hadley chest carved with the initials "T.B." In this setting, at least, Wyeth's meditation on Karl Kuerner's Chadds Ford, Pennsyl-

vania, barn and on a rural America fast receding seems part and parcel of the late twentieth-century antiquarian movement that some fear is disappearing.

To house their seventeenth-century furniture, the couple added an atmospheric tavern room with stone walls, an enormous stone hearth, and old beams (Fig. 16). They furnished the room with an exceptional Boston drop-leaf dining table of about 1710 to 1720 and a set of nine comely Boston chairs of roughly the same date, with shaped crests, spoon backs, and Spanish feet. "It took me twenty-five years to assemble the set," confides West Chester, Pennsylvania, dealer Skip Chalfant who lived with these sculptural pieces, which the collectors covered in Russia leather salvaged in 1973 from the eighteenth-

Fig. 16. The tavern room contains a Boston drop-leaf dining table of 1710–1720; an assembled set of eight c. 1720–1725 Boston maple side chairs and one armchair, all upholstered in Russia leather; and a two-drawer joined, carved, and painted oak sunflower chest, Wethersfield, Connecticut, 1680–1720. On the chest are, left, a rare English delft blue and white candlestick, Southwark, dated “1653” and initialed “I/I-T” and the double portrait jug shown in Fig. 18. Also visible is a pair of Commonwealth silver dishes, London, c. 1654; a pair of silver casters by Francis Garthorne, London, c. 1683; and a pair of silver salt cellars, London, 1694. On the rear wall hangs the delft charger shown in Fig. 17. The table is set with an assembled service of Georgian silver, 1731–1769. The Serapi carpet dates to c. 1890.



Fig. 17. Delftware charger, Southwark, probably Pickleherring Quay or Montague Close, 1638. Inscribed “W/AF” and “1638” on the front and “RI” and “AFW” in monogram on the back. Diameter 16 ½ inches. Decorated with the biblical scene of the Adoration of the Magi, the plate may commemorate the marriage of Aaron Wit and Frances Allen in 1638 in Southwark. “RI” may stand for Richard Irons, who was buried in Southwark in 1664 perhaps the potter or painter of this dish.

century ship *Die Frau Metta Catharina*, sunk off the coast of Cornwall.

Arrayed on a two-drawer sunflower chest made in the Wethersfield area between 1680 and 1720 is more rare English delft. Dated 1653, a blue and white candlestick is the only one of its kind still in private hands. A dated 1662 blue and white commemorative jug is decorated with the portraits of Charles II and his queen, Catherine of Braganza (Fig. 18).

Housed in an adjacent, purpose-built cellar, a comprehensive wine collection, assembled by the husband over thirty years, emphasizes decades-old Bordeaux, Burgundies, and Rhônes. From time to time, the couple has financed projects with sales of their liquid assets. More often, they simply enjoy their good fortune as an accoutrement to memorable evenings spent with friends and family, their faith in New England’s durable values ever solid and unchanged by time.



Fig. 18. Delftware jug with portraits of Charles II and Catherine of Braganza, London, 1662. Inscribed "M/HS/1662" and "C R/2" and "D/QK" on the front. Height 11 5/8 inches.

Fig. 19. Delftware charger decorated with Adam and Eve, Southwark, Pickleherring Quay or Rotherhithe, 1650. Initialed and dated "T.M/1650" on the front and "I.H/1650 on the back. Diameter 14 1/4 inches.

Fig. 20. Delftware blue-dash charger, Southwark, possibly Richard Newnham, Pickleherring Quay, c. 1645–1660. Diameter 16 3/8 inches. The equestrian figure may be Charles I or the military commander General Monck, later the Duke of Albermarle.

Fig. 21. Delftware portrait charger of Charles II, probably London, 1660. Inscribed and dated "CV 2 R 1660." Diameter 11 7/8 inches. Unrecorded before it came to auction in 2011, this plate dated 1660, the year of the Restoration, is the earliest and best preserved example of its kind known.

