

The Ingenious Patent Extension Tables of Cornelius Briggs

by Dennis Carr and Derin Bray

In the best tradition of Yankee ingenuity, the Boston furniture maker Cornelius Briggs (1787/1788–1848) was a restless inventor and tinkerer. He approached his craft with the kind of alacrity that characterized a new brand of entrepreneurial craftsman in the first half of the nineteenth century. The proprietor of what became one of the largest furniture shops in the Boston area from the 1820s to the 1840s, Briggs is best known today for a series of extension dining tables he patented in 1843. His two sons, Charles Cornelius and Joshua, carried on the business following his death. A labeled Briggs patent mahogany extension table recently acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Fig. 1) will be on view when the museum opens a new Art of the Americas wing later this year.¹ It exemplifies Briggs' engineering prowess and his enterprising spirit during an era of experimentation and change in the Boston furniture industry just prior to the mid-nineteenth century.

Briggs was not the first cabinetmaker to produce extension tables, but he was the first to patent and market them extensively. Andrew Jackson Downing noted and illustrated "Briggs' newly invented extension dining-table" in his influential building guide

The Architecture of Country Houses (1850).² Briggs' sons advertised the invention in local newspapers, offering a variety of styles in mahogany, rosewood, black walnut, and oak.³ In a "Special Notice to Housekeepers," the sons claimed the extension tables to be "entirely free from all complicated machinery, and...universally acknowledged superior, in style, simplicity, and quality, to any Extension

Dining Table Manufactured in this city or elsewhere."⁴

The innovation was a center leg concealed between the clustered columns of the base when closed (Fig. 2), as well as a windlass mechanism attached to a cord that allowed one person at the end of the table to draw the two halves together simply by turning a hand crank. The "whole appears like an ordinary circular centre-table, when shut up," Downing wrote, and it "is more easily managed and cheaper than the common form."

To a nineteenth-century homeowner, an extension table suited the changing functions of a room and satisfied a growing taste for novelty.⁵ In a period when interior spaces were still mutable (unlike today's generally static mode of furnishing), their definitions and uses changed depending on the needs of the occupants. A center table—that classic Victorian emblem of a close family structure—could swiftly and gracefully transform into a grand platform for entertaining. When fully drawn out the table could accommodate the addition of five leaves (Fig. 3). Thomas Parkman



Fig. 3: Table shown in figure 1 extended with five leaves. Courtesy of Aileen Minor American Antiques, Centreville, Md.



Fig. 2: View of table shown in figure 1 extended. Courtesy of Aileen Minor American Antiques, Centreville, Md.

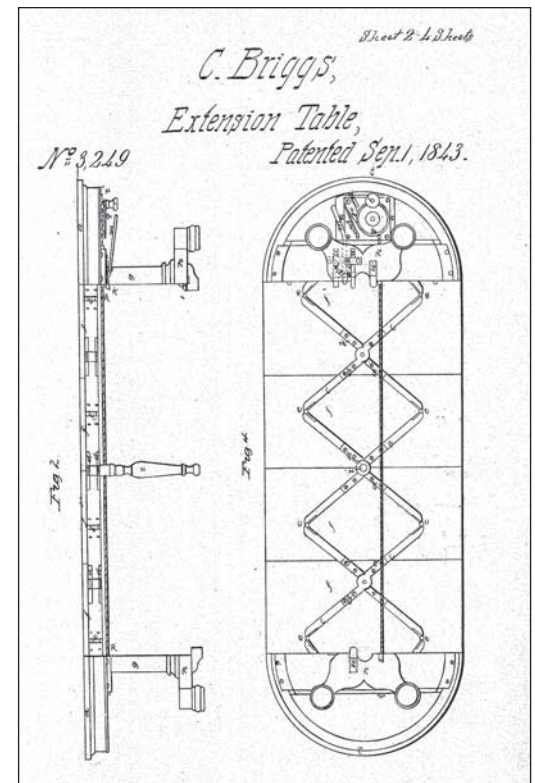


Fig. 1: Cornelius Briggs, patent extension table, Boston, Mass., 1843-1845. Mahogany. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Museum purchase with funds donated by Shirley and Walter Amory and Mr. and Mrs. Ulf B. Heide, (2007.338). Photo courtesy of Aileen Minor American Antiques, Centreville, Md.



The Briggs table at the MFA bears the hallmarks of his patented design of 1843 (Fig. 5), but lacks the innovation of a subsequent patent issued two years later that incorporated a small screw mechanism to better align the two semi-circular table tops when joined. This information helps to date the table before the second patent, issued September 9, 1845, and after the first (no. 3249). A label on the underside instructed the user how to operate the “BRIGGS’ PATENT CENTRE EXTENSION TABLE,” a relatively new concept in this time period—furniture that needed to come with instructions (Fig. 6). To shut the table, the label advises the user to “Push the small handle from you as far as it will go,” and then “Take hold of the knob on the capstan, and wind up brisk.”

Briggs’ invention of “new and useful Improvements in Extension-Tables” was a com-



Cushing (1787–1854) traveled to Briggs’ wareroom in Boston in 1846, paying \$75 for a thirteen-foot extension table.⁶ William J. Rotch, the scion of a wealthy whaling family from New Bedford, Massachusetts, may have purchased a table from Briggs or his sons around the time he built a new Gothic Revival style house in New Bedford in 1845. A watercolor dating to the 1870s of his family’s home shows a Briggs extension table as the centerpiece of an eclectically furnished dining room (Fig. 4).

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Fig. 4: Henry H. Crapo, drawing of the William J. Rotch house, New Bedford, Mass., 1870–1880. Watercolor on paper. Courtesy of Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library.

Fig. 5: Drawing for U.S. patent no. 3249, endorsed July 8, 1843, patented September 1, 1843, for Cornelius Briggs’ extension table. Courtesy of the United States Patent Office.

Fig. 6: Label on underside of table shown in figure 1. Courtesy of Aileen Minor American Antiques, Centreville, Md.

mercial success. In what may have been the debut party for the table, his design was awarded a silver medal at the 1844 Exhibition of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association attended by some sixty thousand people. According to the judges, it was “the best specimen of Cabinet Furniture in the Exhibition.”⁷ The 1820 Boston census records seven craftsmen working in Briggs’ “Cabinet and Chair Manufactory,” making his one of the largest such shops in the city; with fewer workers only than cabinetmakers Nathaniel Bryant (ten) and Solomon Loud (nine). His commercial success with the patent extension table allowed Briggs to work on other projects, and in 1847, the year before his death, he submitted a patent for a new and improved sofa table, or “convertible chair” (U.S. patent no. 5390, dated December 11, 1847). His death in 1848 perhaps took the wind out of the sails of this new invention as a viable commercial product, but his sons continued to advertise the sofa table—which they claimed was particularly suited for ships and steamboats—alongside the company’s patent extension table in the *Boston Almanac* in 1851. In 1848, Briggs’ sons were



Fig. 7: Roswell Gleason House, Dorchester, Mass., built about 1840. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

listed in the Roxbury City Directory as “extension table manuf.” in Boston. The brothers operated under the name C. C. & J. Briggs and continued to work from their father’s Boston shop until about 1852, after which they disbanded their partnership. In the 1854 Roxbury City Directory, Charles Cornelius and Joshua



Fig. 8: Roswell Gleason and Sons (active 1851–1871), Dorchester, Mass., Cruet holder or “Magic Caster,” 1857–1871. Silver plate and cut glass. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Marion E. Davis Fund, (1984.23). Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Briggs are listed at separate locations.

Emblematic of the age of industrial furniture production in Boston during the 1840s and the intense commercial rivalry between furniture makers that spawned a flurry of patent applications and innovations in furniture design, a number of Briggs’ ingenious patent extension tables survive today, many with local family histories. The table at the MFA is the first labeled example of this important Boston furniture maker to enter the collection. The table will be installed as the centerpiece of the period dining room of the Roswell Gleason House, a Gothic-Revival-style house built in Dorchester, Massachusetts, about 1840 (Fig. 7). Although acquired by the MFA in 1977, the house’s period woodwork,

which includes an adjoining parlor, has never been installed at the museum. Generously supported by Gleason descendants Elizabeth and Ulf Heide, the Heide Family Roswell Gleason dining room and parlor will feature the life and products of the famous Dorchester pewterer and silver-plate manufacturer Roswell Gleason (1799–1887), who like Briggs was a leading Boston-area craftsman and entrepreneur. Also on display in the room will be Gleason’s most renowned and innovative product, his transforming silver-plate “Magic Caster,” which he patented in 1857 (Fig. 8). The period rooms are set to open to the public in the new Art of the Americas wing in late 2010. AFA

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1. The museum is grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Ulf B. Heide and Shirley and Walter Amory for generously providing the purchase funds for the table.
2. Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850; rpt. New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), 421.
3. *Boston Almanac*, 1851.
4. *Boston Almanac*, 1850.
5. For more on patent furniture, see David A. Hanks, *Innovative Furniture in America from 1800 to the Present* (New York: Horizon Press, 1981).
6. Thomas Parkman Cushing’s diary. The authors thank Tom Michie for kindly providing this diary entry.
7. *Fourth Exhibition of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association, at Quincy Hall, in the City of Boston, September 16, 1844* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1844), 61.