

On High: A Child's Chair and Mather Family Legacy



As soon as we can, we'll get up to yet higher principles. I will often tell the children what cause they have to love a glorious Christ, who has died for them.

A Father's Resolutions, Cotton Mather (1663-1728)

Hung in an alcove high above the reference desk in the Reading Room at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, Cotton Mather's portrait is well positioned to exemplify Puritan authority (fig. 1). His majestic wig and black robe provide the visual idioms signaling his stature. He keeps good company. Positioned at the left of an ensemble of five portraits, Mather's likeness faces that of his father, the Reverend Increase Mather (1639-1723) (fig. 2), and he is flanked on the right by his nephew the Reverend Mather Byles (1707-1788). His younger brother, the Reverend Samuel Mather (1674-1733), hangs to the left of Increase. This group of major Mather clergy is anchored at its center by the eminent Governor John Winthrop (1587/88-1649). Cotton Mather's portrait, painted by Peter Pelham in 1727, represents a man whose achievements were well known beyond his role as a prominent New England clergyman in the Congregational church. Mather's 1728 obituary in *The New-England Weekly Journal* stated: "He was perhaps the *principal Ornament* of this Country, and the *greatest Scholar* that was ever bred in it." Mather now serves as an ornament of the Reading Room surrounded by historical documents and American-"bred" treasures. He was the author of over 400 publications, and his work in science and medicine earned him election as a Fellow of the Royal Society in London. No wonder scholars glancing up from their labors toward Mather's seemingly benevolent countenance sometimes feel a bit intimidated.

If Mather's portrait inspires reverence, another object associated with him helps bring him down a bit from his lofty position: his childhood highchair (fig. 3). Also on view at the AAS (but not within Mather's gaze), the Mather family highchair stands just 38.5 inches high on thick turned posts raked for stability (fig. 4). Even at first glance, the chair's missing elements are apparent. One pommel or handgrip has lost its original hefty girth to breakage. Holes in the front posts signal the former presence of a footrest—no doubt broken off from continual use (fig. 5). Other holes drilled through the side of each front post suggest that a wooden restraining rod was inserted through the top of the posts to help hold a child in place (fig 6). The rod could be removed to extract the child. It is easy to imagine such a device lost to time.



1. Cotton Mather (1663-1728) by Peter Pelham (1697-1751), oil on canvas, 1727. Gift of Josephine Spencer Gay, 1923. This portrait is currently on view at the AAS. The portrait of Cotton that Hannah Mather Crocker donated in 1815 is currently in storage and is a c. 1750 copy of the portrait by Pelham. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts

(There is perhaps nothing quite so humanizing as artifacts of childhood. The family cradle used for Emily Dickinson as an infant was reserved by her niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, for viewing along with other objects in a special room in her home. Visitors making pilgrimages to Amherst, Massachusetts, to learn more about the elusive poet in the early twentieth century were not disappointed by such tangible evidence that Dickinson was, in fact, mortal.)



2. Increase Mather (1639-1723), anonymous, oil on canvas, c. 1720. Gift of Hannah Mather Crocker, 1815. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts

Also erased with time is the chair's original painted surface. Numerous descriptions of the chair indicate that the posts were decorated by the turner with lightly incised lines. Most of these lines were not in fact for decoration but were vergier marks, scribed to mark the placement of the seat lists, arms, back rails, and stretchers. These marks aided the turner in assembling the chair. The wood was painted—probably black, judging by traces—so the scribe lines would not have been visible in its original state. The only incised lines that might have been visible as decoration through the paint would have been those on the spindles and tiered finials.

Despite its somewhat rough appearance, the chair holds its own next to the likes of John Hancock's monumental and elegant furnishings positioned nearby. The highchair has its own charm and aesthetic appeal—the chair's turner, for instance, tapered the legs toward the base to visually offset the raked frame. Yet it is the chair's illustrious family origins that give it resonance and makes us take note. This seemingly humble turned highchair is the earliest documented furniture gift to the American Antiquarian Society, which was founded in 1812 by Isaiah Thomas. In 1814, Cotton Mather's granddaughter, Hannah Mather Crocker (1742-1829) of Boston, worked out an arrangement with Thomas that brought some 900 volumes from the Mather family library to the AAS as well as manuscript material that established the core of the extensive Mather Family Papers. Crocker donated several Mather family portraits along with the highchair in 1815, giving the chair solid Mather family provenance.

For many viewers, the mere thought that Cotton Mather was once a child gives them pause—if not fodder for the imagination. Inspired by the chair, a recent fellow at the AAS elaborated on his mental image of an infant Cotton Mather in

a [feature for the blog](#) *Religion in American History*. He imagined young bewigged Cotton delivering a lengthy monologue from the highchair:

Here, my imagination wandered, to seeing young Cotton in the high chair. I assume he still has a very large powdered whig [sic] on. In asking for milk, his verbosity and prolixity begins early ... "Mother, whereas milk is good (just like salt is good), and whereas I trust in your benevolence to your children, wouldst thou kindly fill my pr'offerred goblet with some of ye yonder milk? [continuing for several more paragraphs.]



3. Mather family highchair, c. 1640. Gift of Hannah Mather Crocker, 1815. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts



4. Mather family highchair, side view. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian

Society, Worcester, Massachusetts

Beyond providing the inspiration for imagining an icon of religious rectitude as a child, what does this rare example of seventeenth-century furniture yield? What stories can it tell? The mere fact that it survives is a story of Mather family lore and legacy. Family legend maintained that the chair had been made in England and traveled to America with the family. When it was acquired from Hannah Mather Crocker in 1815, it was described in the AAS donor and donations book as "A small Chair, made in England, in the Reign of King James I for Richard Mather, (first Minister in Dorchester, Mass.) to set at Table when a young child, and brought by him to this country at its first settlement." An early handwritten label (at some point erroneously identified as in Isaiah Thomas's hand) prepared for display with the chair reads: "This chair was brought to America by Richard Mather, grandfather of Cotton Mather in 1635." When Abiel Holmes visited "the antiquarian room" in 1822 he was told (or at least inferred) that it was the chair in which Richard Mather sat on his passage to New England. Holmes felt sure this could not be true and wrote to Hannah Mather Crocker to clarify. Holmes later thanked her for her "authentick account of the Mather's small chair." Hannah's account of the chair (probably the same she sent to Holmes) was recorded in her reminiscence in the 1820s:

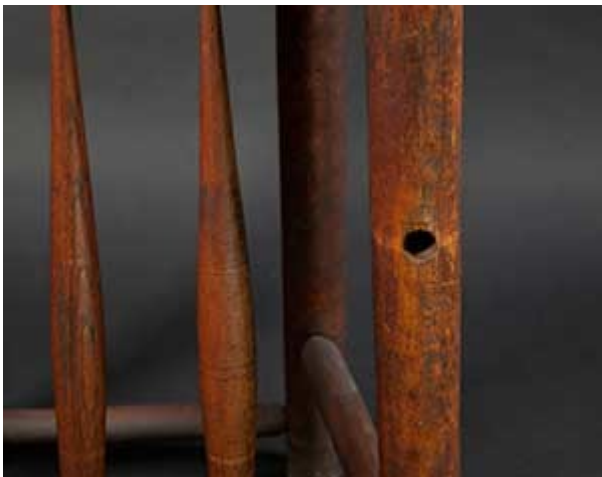
Richard sat in it when a child. He was married in 1624; his children that were born in Europe sat in the chair before he came to this country—Samuel, Timothy, Nathaniel, Joseph. The last named sat in it when he brought the chair to America. Eleazer and Increase were born in America. They both sat in the same chair. The chair descended to Increase and all his children sat in the same. It came in line to Cotton Mather. His children all sat in the same. It descended to his son Samuel, and his children sat in the same chair. His youngest daughter [Hannah, the writer of these notes] was the only child that had any children, and she has had ten children sit in the chair and several grandchildren.

By Hannah's count some *forty* Mather children sat in the highchair. Aside from the unlikely event that a chair subjected to the use of so many youngsters would survive, we now know that Hannah's account is not quite accurate. The chair was not made in England but in New England and therefore could not have traveled across the Atlantic with Richard. Microanalysis conducted by the late Benno Forman indicates that the chair was made primarily of poplar, an American wood often used in the furniture of eastern Massachusetts. Thus the highchair, made of American rather than European wood, was not made for Richard Mather's own use as a child but for his children or grandchildren. If it was purchased by Richard and Catherine Mather following their arrival in Massachusetts in 1635 for their sons Eleazer or Increase, then it was likely made in Dorchester where Richard had accepted the ministry of the North Church. If it was commissioned by Increase and Maria Mather when their son Cotton was born in

1663, then it was probably made in Boston, where Increase was minister of Boston's North Church from 1664 to 1723. There are so few surviving examples of chairs of this period that it is difficult to judge stylistic difference even a generation apart. A [similar example](#), however, exists at the Art Institute of Chicago.

That chair has been similarly dated to 1640/70 and has a history of ownership in the Sumner family, who emigrated from England to Dorchester in 1636. It is plausible that both chairs were made in or near Dorchester in the late 1630s.

In her genealogical account of the Mather family written in the early 1820s, Hannah noted that she "wished the chair to be deposited in the antiquarian rooms with the venerable shades, that those who come after her may look to the rock from whence they were hewn, and find an ancient seat to rest any chip of the old block." Certainly no adult Mather descendant could even begin to squeeze into this "ancient" seat, yet Hannah chose the highchair to symbolically represent "the rock from whence they were hewn." Could it be that because the chair was gender-neutral it could represent more than the male Mather clergy seen in the portraits? The highchair had a direct connection to male and female Mathers alike. In Hannah's version of what family members used the chair, at least 18 girls and 15 boys could claim sitting rights. Indeed, the chair may have been especially important to Hannah's own claim as the remaining chip of the old Mather block descending directly from Increase: "I am the only little limb and the only grand child of Cotton."



5. Mather family highchair, hole in lower front post for former footrest. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



6. Mather family highchair, holes in top of front posts for restraining rod. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts

Hannah Mather Crocker, published author and public figure, is best known for what is considered the first book on women's rights in America. In *Observations of the Real Rights of Women, with Their Appropriate Duties, Agreeable to Scripture, Reason and Common Sense* (1818), she argues for the intellectual equality of women and promotes a vision of women's informal political participation. Crocker, long committed to the advancement of women, founded a Masonic lodge for women in 1778 based on the all-male lodges that excluded women. She also helped found in 1813 the School of Industry for poor girls in the northern district of Boston. Excluded from a career in ministry due to her sex, Crocker nevertheless wrote sermons and donated a number of her theological writings to the AAS during the same years that she donated the Mather library, the portraits, and the highchair. Given her interest in gender equality and the education of underprivileged girls, it seems fitting that Crocker would include the highchair as part of the family legacy for "any chip" of the old block.

Today the highchair is primarily identified with Cotton Mather, and there is little doubt that he did indeed sit in it. It is also likely that it was used by his children. His own writings suggest that his children may have been entertained by stories from the Bible while held captive in the highchair:

I will early entertain the children with delightful stories out of the Bible. In the talk of the table, I will go through the Bible, when the olive-plants about my table are capable of being so watered. But I will always conclude the stories with some lessons of piety to be inferred from them.

A Father's Resolutions, Cotton Mather (1663-1728)

While the use of the chair as a station for Biblical stories seems appropriate, physical evidence indicates that the chair may also have aided in getting Mather children both spiritually and literally upright and beyond the danger zone of early childhood. Wear along the rear posts and on the ball turnings of

the tiered finials are telltale signs of the chair's use as a walker (fig. 7). The practice of flipping the chair on its back (or its front) so a child learning to walk could push the chair along for stability was not uncommon. Excessive abrasion on chair posts (though not on this one) may indicate that chairs were even tipped for use to stabilize youngsters learning to ice skate. The use of chair backs as supports for the rods used for dipping candles and for holding quilting frames in the early nineteenth century are additional examples of the multiple functions that chairs served in early American homes.



7. Mather family highchair, wear on back of finial and post suggesting the chair's use as a child's walker. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts



8. Mather family highchair. Rectangular tenons on the chair point to the likelihood of a former panel seat. Grooves on the inside of the seat lists (not visible here) prove that the original seat was wooden. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts

Other indications of wear and use suggest alterations brought about by generations of use by Mather children. The ill-fitting top rung on the back appears to be a replacement. It also seems that the side stretchers have been replaced, perhaps after breakage. The existing stretchers simply do not show the wear that one would expect for a chair of this age. The rear stretcher has also been rotated with three holes facing downward, suggesting that the back could have potentially once held spindles matching those on the front. A more likely explanation though is that the maker made an error in drilling the holes (one appears unfinished) since the upper seat rail does not have corresponding holes.

While previous studies of the Mather family highchair assert that there is no indication that the chair ever had a board seat, close inspection shows otherwise. The rectangular tenons on the front and rear seat lists that protrude through the posts at the side are clues that the chair was likely constructed to support a wooden seat (fig. 8). But it is the grooves on the inside of the seat lists (under the rush) that leave no doubt that the chair originally had a panel seat, replaced with rush at some later point during the chair's life. Panel seats were thin, and this one probably shrank from the grooves or split from use. The rush seat was also likely replaced several times given the generations of Mather use (fig. 9). Chair bottoms made of rush or flag, wood splint, or braided corn husk necessarily wore out because of their critical functional role. Chair seating in New England was typically an anonymous task carried out by marginalized members of society—poor, juvenile delinquents, elderly, often Native American, and female. It is easy to imagine Hannah recruiting one of the poor girls from the newly opened School of Industry to give the chair a new seat before donating it to the “antiquarian rooms with the venerable shades” in 1815. It may have been at this time, too, that Hannah had the well-used chair frame cleaned of accumulated grime and/or cracked paint.

The highchair's story is more than a tale of how the object was made or how it has changed physically over time. It is also about how it has been perceived and interpreted as a relic of the Mather family as well as a symbol of craftsmanship and simplicity from America's colonial past. In the early twentieth century it was the chair's quaint appearance that appealed to Esther Singleton (*The Furniture of Our Forefathers*, 1900), Frances Clary Morse (*Furniture of the Olden Time*, 1902), and Wallace Nutting (*Furniture of the Pilgrim Century*, 1924). Each of these publications includes both an image and description of the Mather highchair. Indeed, Wallace Nutting describes the highchair as “remarkably quaint.”

While the chair's association with Cotton Mather gives it status as an object, it is the lessons associated with Hannah Mather Crocker's role in preserving the chair that give it meaning—and perhaps help bring Cotton down a bit from his pedestal. For Hannah, the highchair served as the touchstone of her family—“venerable ancestors for four generations”—both male and female. The idea that so many Mathers sprang from that humble seat gave it a narrative

beyond its function as a highchair. That the material memories of youth and family were significant to Hannah is evidenced in the first two stanzas of her poem "To My Birth Place," written in 1818 and published in the *Franklin Monitor* (Charlestown, Mass.), March 18, 1820:

How sweet are those scenes to my memory dear,
Such scenes as I [ne'er] can forget.
And as I'm viewing thee drops the sad tear
To leave thee how hard is my lot.
I love the dear spot where my infancy dawn'd,
Where my eyes first [saw] the light.
I love too that chamber where I often [have] mourn'd
But sweetly have slept all the night.

We may never know what turner or turners labored to build the chair, who reworked the seats, who broke the footrest, or how many Mather youngsters pushed the chair on its back as a walker, but the chair's survival allows us to consider not only the family who used it but also the hands that fabricated it and the many stories imagined and created for it. The stories are intertwined and help us better understand the intersection of users, makers, and memory-makers of what has become an iconic and evocative object.



9. Mather family highchair. The rush or flag seat currently on the chair was probably resealed more than once during the lifetime of the highchair. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

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Further Reading:

For more on the Mather portraits see Lauren B. Hewes, *Portraits in the Collection of the American Antiquarian Society* (Worcester, 2004).

Publications that include the Mather highchair beyond those mentioned in the text include the following: Benno M. Forman, *American Seating Furniture 1630-1730* (New York, 1988); Jonathan L. Fairbanks, Robert F. Trent et al., *New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century* (Boston, 1982); and Wendell D. Garrett, "Furniture Owned by the American Antiquarian Society," *The Magazine Antiques*, 1970.

Hannah Mather Crocker's *Reminiscences and Traditions of Boston* has recently been published for the first time after being housed in the New England Historic Genealogical Society archives for over 130 years. See Eileen Hunt Botting and Sarah L. Houser, eds. [*Reminiscences & Traditions of Boston*](#) (Boston, 2011).

For more on the marginalized members of society working at chair bottoming, see Nan Wolverton, "Bottomed Out: Female Chair Seaters in Nineteenth-Century Rural New England," in *Rural New England and Furniture: People, Place, and Production* (Boston, 1998).

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